

Gadamer's Concept of Experience

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Bachelor of Arts (Honours)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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University of Tasmania

August 2016

*If the world is structured like language
and language is structured like the mind,
then the mind with its fullnesses and voids
is nothing, or almost, which isn't reassuring.*

Eugenio Montale, 'The Form of the World'

For Emma

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my supervisors, Ingo Farin and Jeff Malpas, for their invaluable support and guidance. I have spent countless hours writing and reading over breakfast or coffee at Devil's Kitchen Café, with the kind encouragement of three generations of owners and staff, whom I would also like to thank: Mark; Nathan, Azumi, Brent, and Julie; Han and Annie. The many staff in the philosophy department, past and present, academic and administrative, who have been so forthcoming with advice, assistance and opportunities. Quinton and James, for their comments and suggestions on various drafts. My friends and fellow students. My father, who always takes an active interest. My mother, the blackbird. And my wife, who made this all possible.

Introduction

Montaigne maintains that the thirst for new experience is a sign of vigour in life.¹ To rest content with what one already knows and understands, to remain only within what one has experienced before, is a sign of exhaustion or decline: it is to be only half alive.² The pursuit of experience is boundless: 'its food is wonder, the chase, ambiguity'. Apollo, he says, revealed this clearly by speaking obscurely: we have to be kept interested! What is most exciting is not to be confirmed in what one knows, but to have what one knows contradicted, to have new and unexpected directions suggested. To have what one knows contradicted not only leads us to understand better, but it also teaches us of the fallibility of our judgement, which is the more important lesson: 'When I find myself convicted of a false opinion by another man's reasoning, I do not so much learn what new thing he has told me and this particular bit of ignorance – that would be small gain – as I learn my weakness in general, and the treachery of my understanding.'³

I have begun with Montaigne, but all of the foregoing could, without misrepresentation, be attributed to Gadamer, his fellow humanist. For Gadamer, our understanding of things is always in danger of becoming too settled, too comfortable with itself – and the risk is that it will then simply exclude what is other to itself. To really seek to understand is to seek contradiction and provocation.

In the following, I present an analysis and critique of the concept of experience that is central to Gadamer's hermeneutics. In the foreword to the second edition of *Truth and Method*, he tells us he has used the term hermeneutics to mean 'a theory of the real experience that thinking is' (TM xxxiii);⁴ and that the chapter on experience (i.e. TM II.3 B) 'takes on a systematic and key position in [Gadamer's] investigations' (TM xxxii). He tells us that his inquiry 'asks (to put it in Kantian terms): how is understanding possible?', and it asks it 'of all human

¹ Michel de Montaigne, 'Of Experience' in *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald Frame (Everyman's Library, 2003).

² 'Of Experience', p. 996.

³ 'Of Experience', pp. 1001-2.

⁴ For abbreviations of frequently cited works, see the Bibliography.

experience of the world and human living'; the term 'hermeneutics' is used to denote 'the basic being-in-motion of *Dasein* that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world' (TM xxvii). What I will show in the following is that the concept of experience is central to understanding not only the function of 'prejudices', but also the connection between 'understanding' and 'genuine experience', and what the 'truth event' is and why Gadamer's account of truth cannot be understood simply as correspondence, coherence or *adequatio rei et intellectus*. Further, a particular kind of picture of Gadamer emerges by putting his concept of experience in the foreground: not the ponderous Gadamer some commentators paint, who overrides difference in his insistence on agreement, but a Gadamer enamoured of the startling and the different. But what is his concept of experience, and what is its structure?

Gadamer's concept of experience is not unitary, but tri-partite. The first to surface in *Truth and Method* is '*Erlebnis*', which is what I will call 'heightened' experience. This Gadamer opposes to '*Erfahrung*', which he terms 'genuine' experience. ('Hermeneutical' experience, as we will see, is a sub-species of genuine experience.) Finally, there is a kind of experience which remains largely unthematized through *Truth and Method*, but which is presupposed by the other two kinds, which we can term 'ordinary' experience, and it is with this that we will begin.

A few words, first, about my approach and method. In the following, I am not seeking to produce a primarily doxographical work, one that sets out, clarifies and perhaps defends Gadamer's position against objections. While this is part of my project, my real goal lies elsewhere. I am engaged in what we can call a *strong reading*, by which I mean a reading in which I attempt to wrest what I take to be Gadamer's central and most interesting insight from his text, and to develop and criticise it. As Heidegger says, 'one must not only attach oneself to theses which can be grasped doxographically; one must also derive one's orientation from the objective tendency of the problematic' (BT 131). The problematic, or central insight, with which I am concerned is Gadamer's concept of experience, particularly the concept of *Erfahrung*. I say this insight must be 'wrested' from

the text because Gadamer, like every other human being, is not always entirely consistent, and not always consistent with his basic insights. Gadamer is not always true to the insight he has had; and at times, because his interests were directed in one way or another, he neglects or even passes over in silence certain crucial issues regarding this insight. What I am attempting to do, then, is to lay hold of this insight and then develop it, in the process sometimes needing to defend it from Gadamer himself.

But this is too strong a way of putting it. While I certainly aim to develop what Heidegger calls 'the objective tendency of the problematic', I do not have Heidegger's confidence that an immanent development would follow a *necessary* path. There is, in other words, an idiosyncratic element, expressed well by Anne Carson in the 'Note on Method' at the beginning of her *Economy of the Unlost*.⁵ She writes: 'There is too much self in my writing. [...] I do not want to be a windowless monad – my training and trainers opposed subjectivity strongly, I have struggled since the beginning to drive my thought out into the landscape of science and fact where other people converse logically and exchange judgements – but I go blind out there. So writing involves some dashing back and forth between that darkening landscape where facticity is strewn and a windowless room cleared of everything I do not know.' This is where a kind of idiosyncratic production can take place: 'thought finds itself in this room in its best moments – locked inside its own pressures, fishing up facts of the landscape from notes or memory as well as it may'. The result for Carson, as anyone who has read *Economy of the Unlost* can attest, is marvellous; but it will not quite suit me for the present task, since (as she notes) 'it would be a gesture of false consciousness to say academic writing can take place there [sc. in the windowless monad]'.

Nonetheless, Adorno notes that idiosyncrasy need not be the enemy of objective validity (which a dissertation such as this one must claim). The interpretations worked out in an essay, he says, are, from the sober doxographical perspective, 'over-interpretations':

But letting oneself be terrorised by the prohibition against saying more than was meant right then and there means complying with the

⁵ Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost* (Princeton, 1999), pp. vii-viii.

false conceptions that people and things harbour concerning themselves. Interpretation then becomes nothing but removing an outer shell to find what the author wanted to say, or possibly the individual psychological impulses to which the phenomenon points. But since it is scarcely possible to determine what someone may have thought or felt at any particular point, nothing essential is to be gained through such insights. [...] In order to be disclosed [...], the objective wealth of meanings encapsulated in every intellectual phenomenon demands of the recipient the same spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is castigated in the name of objective discipline. Nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it at the same time. The criteria for such interpretation are its compatibility with the text and with itself, and its power to give voice to the elements of the object in conjunction with each other.⁶

The present dissertation is, then, an essay in this sense. I have endeavoured to pull elements of Gadamer's thought into a productive constellation, and to develop the consequences. At times, I have endeavoured to bring elements of his thought into better focus by bringing them into proximity with the thoughts of someone else – as Carson claims for her project of reading Paul Celan with Simonides of Keos, 'each is placed like a surface on which the other may come into focus. Sometimes you can see a celestial object better by looking at something else, with it, in the sky.'⁷ Which 'something else' one brings in is not a matter of strict necessity, but is guided by the anticipation that its proximity will be productive. One may get a variety of results, depending on this 'something else'.⁸ So I have often found that the best way to explicate Gadamer is to situate him in a context of rival positions. This allows me to illuminate what he has in

⁶ 'The Essay as Form', in Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, two volumes, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia, 1991), 1:4-5.

⁷ *Economy of the Unlost*, p. viii.

⁸ For example, Joel Weinsheimer opens *Gadamer's Hermeneutics* (Yale, 1985) with a chapter on Gadamer and method, which closes with a consideration of 'some unsuspected affinities of [Gadamer's] hermeneutics with mathematical logic' (p. x). The result is that Weinsheimer develops some of the potentials of Gadamer's hermeneutics in a certain direction; but there is no immanent necessity to this development – it depends on situating Gadamer in a particular hermeneutical context, which brings certain elements into focus and suggests certain developments.

common with other thinkers, as well as to show how he is distinct from them, and what is at stake in these distinctions. Thus, throughout the following I make regular reference to such figures as Montaigne and Samuel Beckett, Heidegger and Aquinas, Hegel and Aristotle, Adorno and Benjamin, Alasdair MacIntyre and Terry Eagleton, Charles Taylor and Bernard Williams, Borges and Raymond Geuss.

Final sanction for this approach comes from Gadamer himself. 'The horizon of understanding cannot be limited [...] by what the writer originally had in mind,' he says (TM 396). In his discussion of interpretation early in the third part of *Truth and Method*, he notes that the task of the translator requires them to emphasise some parts while letting others fade into the background: 'this is precisely the activity that we call interpretation. Translation, like all interpretation, is a highlighting' (TM 388). He repeats this point, turning it into a kind of mantra, when discussing the performance of a literary work: 'every performance [...] has its own emphasis. [...] All performance is interpretation. All interpretation is highlighting' (TM 401). This is not at all far from Adorno's famous claim: 'All thinking is exaggeration, in so far as every thought that is one at all goes beyond its confirmation by the given facts.'⁹ For Gadamer, a text is a kind of underdetermined substance with a range of potentialities that are realised through application: he notes, for instance, that 'performative interpretation is accidental in a fundamental sense' (TM 401).¹⁰ Which potentialities are realised depends on the hermeneutical context in which application takes place; and thus, by placing Gadamer in the context of a particular set of concerns, and interpreting him by proximity and contrast with a set of particular others, certain potentialities are realised.

In the following, I am engaging in three distinct projects. The first two projects have been touched on in the preceding. First of all, I am attempting, through a close reading, to excavate how Gadamer himself presents his concept of experience, and to show its complex internal relations to his hermeneutical

⁹ 'Opinion Delusion Society', collected in Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, ed. and trans. H. W. Pickford (Columbia, 1998), p. 108. Raymond Geuss suspects this claim is itself an exaggeration: *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, 2005), p. 53 n32. Cf. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (Verso, 2006), p. 49: 'In psychoanalysis, nothing is true except the exaggerations.'

¹⁰ We will see that this point is important for his ontology as a whole.

philosophy as a whole. Second, I am engaged in a strong reading, which means that I am trying to bring his concepts alive, to get them moving again, and to develop them beyond Gadamer's intention. Finally, I attempt to show how, if we draw the consequences of these concepts, they burst the carefully constructed system Gadamer has created for them. One such point is his concept of prejudice, which is too narrow – and once expanded, it undermines his concept of the 'experienced person'. Another point is his concept of genuine experience, which is far more radical and disruptive than he allows for – and which also serves to undermine his concept of the experienced person.

Any serious study in the human sciences is both descriptive and normative. It is descriptive insofar as it attempts to lay bare some aspect of human society, human experience, or human existence; and it is normative insofar as it cannot pretend that this aspect is not of some importance for some reason – perhaps because neglecting some element of our experience is a loss, or perhaps because some aspect of our society systematically works against the possibility of a full life. There is no virtue in descriptive neutrality, such as calling torture 'enhanced interrogation', as though one could describe the phenomenon independently of evaluating it.

In Gadamer's case, he is attempting to draw out and call attention to a dimension of our experience that is obscured by a technological rationality – a kind of rationality that takes understanding to consist in the application of the adequate application of techniques or methods that have been conceived of prior to and independently of the object in question. The experience he calls attention to he calls 'genuine experience' [*Erfahrung*], and it is the experience of the thing under consideration – the *Sache* – speaking *to me* and transforming my understanding of it. This kind of experience, Gadamer thinks, is in serious danger of becoming obscured entirely; and this would be a serious loss, since it is only by conscious reflection on this kind of experience that we can make it productive for us. If we do not realise that this is how understanding works, then our thoughtless presuppositions rule us unchecked.

Having uncovered this dimension of experience, Gadamer proceeds to work out its place in human life. It is productive, Gadamer thinks, of a certain kind of

character – a character that is ‘radically undogmatic’, since the experienced person is well aware of the contingency of all points of view, most especially their own. They become open to dialogue. As we will see, attending to Gadamer’s concept of genuine experience and his discussion of the radically undogmatic man calls into question – if it does not totally undermine – the reading of Gadamer that treats him as a totalising traditionalist who has forgotten about the existence of the finite subject.

This normative dimension of Gadamer’s hermeneutical philosophy – which treats open dialogue as the highest form of human activity – is central to my critique of him; I will argue that what he presents us with is an idealisation of a certain kind of liberal character, and that he neglects to think through the role of commitment (which is, ironically, a kind of prejudice) in understanding. This is connected with his failure to treat failure as anything other than ultimately beneficial. The result is that Gadamer winds up uncritically affirming genuine experience, and I will argue that we should treat it far more ambivalently. In focusing my critique on the element of Gadamer’s thought that seems so inoffensive (who could be opposed to the idea that experience opens one up and makes one less dogmatic?), I aim to provide the kind of provocation that Gadamer associates with all genuine research.¹¹

The argument will proceed as follows. We will begin (Ch. 1) with Gadamer’s account of what we will call ‘ordinary experience’, which is the way in which we experience the world in an everyday way. The crucial thing about everyday experience, for Gadamer, is that it always already makes sense to us; we find ourselves in a world that is open to our understanding of it. This has two aspects. The first is that we have a set of expectations, which Gadamer calls ‘prejudices’, that more or less conform to the world; the world by and large makes sense to us because it typically conforms with our expectations. The second is that the world we experience is one that is partially constituted by language. Being linguistic animals means that we experience not bare objects possessing only extension, mass, etc., but a world of people and things rich with signification, things that

¹¹ Gadamer, ‘Truth in the Human Sciences’, trans. Wachterhauser, collected in Wachterhauser (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Truth* (Northwestern University Press, 1994), p. 29.

relate to other things, that signify, that recall events, people, and other things. Language, as we will see, takes up and transforms the bare world that would exist without beings to make sense of it.

Against the idea of ordinary experience, in which things conform to our expectations, Gadamer opposes two different kinds of experience. The first of these is what we will call 'heightened experience' (Ch. 2), which is an experience that stands out from the humdrum tedium of things going as one expects, but without thereby calling one's expectations into question. Gadamer worries that 'aesthetic' experience often falls into this category, thereby reducing the aesthetic to something that we take pleasure in, and which stands out, but that does not thereby lead us to reflect on what we had taken for granted or to change ourselves in any way. For this reason, Gadamer takes merely 'heightened experience' to be defective.

The second kind of experience Gadamer opposes to ordinary experience is 'genuine experience' (Ch. 3). A genuine experience is one in which one's expectations are defied, and which thus leads one to change one's expectations. The important thing about genuine experience, however, is not so much that it corrects one's understanding of some particular thing (although this is also valuable), but that having one's expectations defied is formative for one's character, teaching one about one's own limits. The desirable outcome of genuine experience, for Gadamer, is that one becomes more open to future experience, and less dogmatic in one's present convictions. One also becomes better able to suspend judgement, and better able to attend to something by holding one's anticipations at bay. This capacity Gadamer calls *phronesis*, after Aristotle's virtue of being about to see the right thing to do in a given situation. We will then round out the discussion of genuine experience by considering Gadamer's reading of Paul Celan's poems, which reading helps to flesh out the relation between genuine experience and language – but which will also show a peculiarity and limitation in the way Gadamer conceives of dialogue: one's dialogue partner offers provocations and leads one to re-evaluate one's own position, but never emerges from this role to become a particular person in their own right, whom one might come to know.

One of the central characteristics of a genuine experience is that it disrupts one's expectations and allows the truth of the thing to shine through, so we will follow the chapter on genuine experience with a chapter on truth (Ch. 4). Gadamer's conception of truth is controversial, not least because he does not set it out in systematic terms; its interpretation is also bound up with that of his ontology of language. In this chapter, I attempt to mediate between a number of competing positions by showing that we need to distinguish between four different aspects of Gadamer's conception of truth: truth as that which shines through and disrupts our expectations; truth as that which is fitting in an interpretation; truth as *aletheia*, as the disclosure of something as what it is; and truth as *adequatio*, as conforming to what something is. Unpacking these four aspects and their interrelation will involve us in questions concerning the relation between hermeneutics and phenomenology in Gadamer's work, as well as the relationship between understanding and interpretation.

Finally, I will set out a critical interpretation of Gadamer's concept of genuine experience (Ch. 5). As we will see, Gadamer's conception of the development of character through experience takes too uncritical a stance towards what having one's convictions shaken can do to one's character. Without denying the value of openness to new experience, one can wonder whether all genuine experience will necessary lead to the building of one's character – some experiences may exercise a destructive power instead. Gadamer's ideal character is someone who is open to every challenge to their convictions, and once we see that not all challenges to our convictions are desirable, the desirability of this kind of character as an ideal comes into question. We will see that, when hermeneutics becomes ethics, it tends to take for granted its own position in a life well lived – rather than seeing that the hermeneutical desire to have one's convictions challenged is only one good among others. The chapter concludes with some considerations of what it might be to take the failure of one's expectations seriously.

I – Ordinary Experience

We will begin our discussion with ordinary experience, since the two other kinds of experience only make sense against its background. Unfortunately, Gadamer does not explicitly thematise this kind of experience at any point; it gets discussed, but not systematically set out. This is no doubt largely because Gadamer's primary concern is with setting out an account of the human sciences, not with human experience in general. Nonetheless, since a central part of his account of the human sciences is that their activities need to be made continuous with the lifeworld, his reflections are more broadly applicable. So we will have to excavate them. We will begin with a general discussion of the kind of experience that Gadamer is interested in, and then move on to an analysis of his account.

The kind of experience Gadamer is interested in is *temporally distended*, and it is a *unity*. This is evident in his discussion of *Erlebnis*, in which he tells us that the concept of *Erlebnis* arose in order to resist scientific abstractions and to place the emphasis on lived experience, a meaningful unity (see TM 57 in particular); and this, of course, dovetails with his own project. What will also become evident later, but which I will simply leave as an assertion here, is that the kinds of experiences Gadamer is interested in *unfold*; they have a kind of narrative; and we cannot make sense of his account of experience if we see experience as consisting of discrete moments.¹²

Lived experience in this sense is not a torrent of unmediated and meaningless sense data, but rather is always already meaningful and organised in some way.¹³ This is the case for two aspects of experience between which we can distinguish: first, we have experiences of particular things in our environment; second, we have a more general experience of our environment, a sense of how it is. With regard to the first kind of experience, our experiences of things often do

¹² On the temporal dimension of Gadamer's concept of experience, see David Vessey, 'Gadamer's Hermeneutic Contribution to a Theory of Time-Consciousness', *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 7, 2, pp. 1-5.

¹³ It is this emphasis on the way experience is *already* meaningful (as opposed to the empiricist concept of sense data) that leads István Fehér to describe hermeneutics as starting from a 'destruction of the concept of experience' ('On the Hermeneutic Understanding of Language: Word, Conversation, and Subject Matter', in Lawrence K. Schmidt (ed.), *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics* [Lexington, 2000], p. 63).

not really call attention to those things themselves; those experiences are typically ordered and interpreted in light of various anticipations, and so the things are experienced in terms of how they relate to those anticipations – it is when our experience of things unfolds differently to how we anticipated it would that attention is called to them. (We will see that it is this latter kind of experience that Gadamer privileges.) Not only is this true for our experience of particular things: it is also true for the second kind of experience, such as that of being ‘at home’ somewhere. If one of my goals or projects is to establish a home for myself somewhere, to dwell there and establish a stable connection with that place, then my experience of being ‘at home’ there will be of a particular variety – satisfying, a sign that my projects are turning out to be successful, and so on. On the other hand, if I see myself as a nomad or a wanderer, if I see coming to dwell somewhere as a sign of exhaustion, at risk of becoming stale, then the experience of being ‘at home’ is of a different kind – a warning sign, an indication that I should pick up and move on, and so on. Both experiences are interpreted in light of how I have come to understand what the experiences indicate and mean; and both experiences are bound up with anticipations and expectations for the future. Similarly, when I plunge into an icy river, my experience of it is going to be quite different depending on things like whether I jumped in intentionally or slipped in; whether I have done it before; whether I am confident in my ability to swim; and so on. It is the difference between its being traumatic or being exhilarating.

Similarly, lived experience is not something I have control over. I can arrange my projects, and so on, but I have little control over what I will remember, no control over what will strike me as significant, and little control over what effect particular experiences have on my projects, world view, and so on.

So this highlights some important features of experience for us: experiences are not self-contained moments, but are rather temporally distended (otherwise we lose sight of the way moments relate to one another, of the way an experience ‘unfolds’); and they are interpretive, drawing their significance from our anticipations – both of how the experience will unfold, and of what we expect it means for the future. Further to this, my experience cannot be accounted for only in terms of my own personal past experience. My experiences occur within a

particular kind of community, one that is the way it is as the result of its past; and my projects – especially those projects upon which I have not reflected – derive from the possibilities that my community leaves open, and expectations – often unarticulated – about what one should or not do, be or become. And if not all projects are open to us, then not all experiences are open to us.

I referred above to the way Gadamer draws on the ‘lived experience’ tradition in philosophy, as opposed to the tradition of scientific abstraction from experience (see again TM 57). In this he draws primarily on Husserl and Dilthey, and while he critiques them (for failing to overcome epistemological abstraction) he does not break with them.

We can take as our Husserl text §27 of *Ideas I*.¹⁴ Here Husserl is concerned with what he terms the *natural attitude* – our ordinary and pre-theoretical orientation towards and experience of the world. In this attitude, I am aware of time stretching out before and behind me, and of space stretching out indefinitely in every direction; I am aware, through my various senses, of objects populating the world around me; and of others, who approach me, talk to me, gesture in various ways – all of which I can immediately grasp the meaning of. Likewise, I am aware of an indefinite multitude of things that are not part of my immediate perceptual awareness:

I can let my attention wander away from the writing table which was just now seen and noticed, out through the unseen parts of the room which are behind my back, to the verandah, into the garden, to the children in the arbor, etc., to all the Objects I directly “know of” as being there are here in the surroundings of which there is also consciousness – a “knowing of them” which involves no conceptual thinking and which changes into a clear intuiting only with the advertence of attention, and even then only partially and for the most part very imperfectly.

¹⁴ Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (Kluwer, 1983).

These things beyond my immediate sphere of perception form the 'constant halo' that accompanies what I am attending to; and it stretches even further to the 'horizon of indeterminate actuality', those things I am not currently conscious of but perhaps could be, but of which I cannot ever be *totally* aware of. And just as this horizon is made up of the various things in the world, it is also a temporal horizon, in which the present moment is understood against the background of past and future.

This world is, finally, not a neutral or unintelligible one, but rather one in which objects typically stand immediately as something – I recognise immediately that *this* is a table, and *this* a cup – and a practical world, in which I can act, formulate projects, understand things as good or bad, helpful or harmful; and understand others as friends, enemies, colleagues, and so on. All of this is important as the background against which to understand Gadamer; for his concept of experience is grounded in the *lifeworld*, and if we miss this then his hermeneutics winds up looking like a modified version Hegel's system, in which *Geist* has simply been replaced by *tradition*.

Let us now turn to Dilthey. We will take as our text a section from a draft of the *Critique of Historical Reason*, 'Awareness, reality: time'.¹⁵ 'Life consists of parts, of experiences which are inwardly related to each other,' Dilthey tells us.

Every particular experience refers to a self of which it is a part; it is structurally interrelated to other parts. Everything which pertains to mind is interrelated [...]. We apprehend connectedness through the unity of consciousness which is the condition of all apprehension. However, connectedness clearly does not follow from the fact of a manifold of experiences being presented to a unitary consciousness. Only because life is itself a structural connection of experiences – i.e. experienceable relations – is the connectedness of life given. This connectedness is apprehended in terms of a more comprehensive category which is a form of judgement about all reality – the relation between whole and part.

¹⁵ Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, ed. Rickman (Cambridge, 1976), p. 211.

Experiences, in other words, are not free-floating: they connect with each other and, as the reference to 'whole and part' makes clear, each experience is understood as a part, against the background of the whole of our experience. An experience cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, my life forms a unity, in which my experiences are connected to one another; they are all understood as experiences *of mine*.

1. Prejudices and Tradition

This gives us a basic framework within which we can explicate Gadamer's account of ordinary experience, and in the following we will be able to see the importance of the lived experience tradition for Gadamer's hermeneutics. Every particular experience occurs against a background that gives it meaning and significance – a horizon partly composed of the history of my own experiences, and partly composed of the world of which I am a part. Gadamer's concept of experience can be seen as an attempt to make sense of experience as always already *intelligible* and *historical*; and the cornerstone of this attempt is the concept of 'prejudice'.

What are 'prejudices', for Gadamer? They form the notorious centrepiece of his account of hermeneutical experience, yet their status is quite obscure. Some commentators take them as basically just being synonymous with 'anticipations';¹⁶ others take them as being something like 'traditional beliefs', those assumptions we all share as being part of some tradition at some time.¹⁷ Of course, there is some sense in which they are both, since their purpose is to give an account of the way the world is intelligible to us as historical beings – and this is how both sets of commentators just cited would want to read them. But, I will argue, there is more to it than this; Gadamer's concept of prejudice is

¹⁶ E.g. Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. Kathryn Plant (Acumen, 2003), p. 85: 'For Gadamer, all understanding emerges entirely in the light of anticipations (which we can call "prejudices").'

¹⁷ E.g. Charles Lamore: '“Prejudices” are simply those traditional beliefs that logically precede or underlie the judgements at which, in some particular context, we arrive.' ('Tradition, Objectivity, and Hermeneutics', in Wachterhauser (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy* [SUNY, 1986], p. 151.) Georgia Warnke seems to presuppose something like this view, without explicitly stating it: see *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Polity, 1987), pp. 3-4. Joel Weinsheimer takes prejudices to be 'historical reality itself': *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 170.

underdeveloped, and careful analysis will show that it cannot (simply) do everything he wants it to.

Gadamer seeks to 'rehabilitate' the concept of prejudice, since – in his view – prejudices have been unfairly judged as 'merely' bad or false (see TM 273).¹⁸ A prejudice is really a kind of 'pre-judgement', something that guides our expectations of what a thing is and what it will do in advance. As Gadamer puts it: a prejudice is 'a judgement that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined' (TM 273). This means that it is not necessarily a false judgement. What prejudices represent is the anticipation and prior understanding we have of something. As he puts it in a slightly different context, prejudices are 'what we take for granted' (RB 11). Whenever we encounter anything and make sense of it, we do so in light of what we think it is going to be like. Insofar as it conforms to our anticipations, it appears as intelligible and makes sense to us; when it defies our anticipations, it shows us that we had misleading anticipations. This defiance of expectations is, for Gadamer, 'genuine' experience (as will be discussed below); and what genuine experience accomplishes is to make me aware of prejudices that previously had been operating unchecked and unnoticed (TM 298). Without prejudices, we could not ever understand anything, for it is only on the basis of prejudices that guide me in my interpretation that my interpretation even gets going; prejudices are the 'conditions of understanding' (TM 278).¹⁹ Without prejudices, it is not clear that I could even recognise things as things, as being in need of interpretation. (The same basic problem underlies Meno's Paradox.) Of course, things do not always immediately appear as intelligible; sometimes we need to work to understand them. But nonetheless, in working to understand something we presuppose that it can be made (more) intelligible, and this Gadamer refers to as the 'fore-conception of completeness' or, on the same page, the 'prejudice of completeness' (TM 294).

So, on Gadamer's account, we have a background of prejudices that serve to make experience intelligible, and also make genuine experience possible. But

¹⁸ Adam Sandel discusses the history of the 'prejudice against prejudice' in his *The Place of Prejudice* (Harvard, 2014), Ch. 1.

¹⁹ Cf. PH 9.

what are these prejudices? And how exactly do they make experience intelligible?

It might be tempting to think of prejudices as being like a big set of propositions, which are either shown to be true or false depending on how experience bears them out. This, however, would be misleading – for it would presuppose that my prejudices are in some kind of determinate form, such that they are cast into the form of a proposition. Gadamer is silent on this point, but his discussion of the linguistic nature of experience (to which we shall come later) suggests that it would be false to read him as though all of our prejudices were always already cast in determinate linguistic form; he insists that language is not a storehouse from which we can withdraw ready-made linguistic formulations,²⁰ but rather that the essence of hermeneutics is trying to find the right word to bring something to language.²¹ Thus, we should think of prejudices as being more or less determinate, as being for the most part largely unarticulated, and as being the ground from which I form anticipations (which I might then cast in propositional form)²² – it is only when they are defied that I realise I have them and am prompted to reflect on them; and it is when I reflect on them that they can be articulated, developed, or rejected. The outcome of this process forms the background of prejudices I then carry forward into future situations: a prejudice is, in a way, an accumulation of experience.²³ *Prejudices are both the input and the output of the hermeneutical circle.* I am never without prejudices, and nor would I want to be, since they are the ground of the possibility of my understanding anything.²⁴

But what does it mean to say that prejudices form ‘the ground of the possibility of my understanding anything’? The best way to answer this question is to turn to Heidegger; for it is to Heidegger that Gadamer himself turns when

²⁰ See Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, pp. 228-9.

²¹ PH 15: ‘... we are familiar with the strange, uncomfortable, and tortuous feeling we have as long as we do not have the right word. When we have found the right expression (it need not always be one word), when we are certain that we have it, then it “stands”, then something has come to a “stand”. [...] What I am describing is the mode of the whole human experience of the world. I call this experience hermeneutical [...].’

²² ‘Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live’ (TM 278).

²³ We will see later how this relates to Gadamer’s concept of *Erfahrung*, which occurs in opposition to the ‘accumulation of experience’.

²⁴ See TM 272-3.

introducing this issue.²⁵ Heidegger observes that when we understand something, we understand it *as* something (BT 149). This 'as-structure' is what enables us to understand things – we understand this thing 'as' a door, or 'as' a table. As Heidegger puts it: 'That which is disclosed in understanding – that which is understood – is already accessible in such a way that its "as which" can be made to stand out explicitly' (BT 149). Understanding 'as' is more primordial than seeing something 'free' of the 'as'; our ordinary experiences are characterised by seeing something immediately as something; 'when we merely stare at something, our just-having-it-before-us lies before us *as a failure to understand it any more*', and is thus derivative of the more basic experience of understanding the things we encounter (BT 149). Understanding unfolds in light of a 'fore-having' (BT 150). A fore-having, as Heidegger says, 'takes the first cut': it gets the interpretation moving by providing the point of view in light of which the thing is to be understood. Prejudices play the same role for Gadamer.²⁶

Let us make a few more comments about Heidegger before we continue, as they will be helpful for us later. (1) What Heidegger makes explicit, but Gadamer does not, is that the as-structure of understanding is *more fundamental* than predication and assertion (BT §33). This parallels his distinction between ready-to-hand and present-at-hand: the ready-to-hand appears *as* something in light of whatever it is I am trying to do, while presence-at-hand is how something appears when I look at it without an eye to employing it for some purpose – when I can assert what it *is*. Presence-at-hand, for Heidegger, is derivative from readiness-to-hand: when we step back and assert that the hammer is a hammer, this is performed on the basis of a horizon of practical interests, such that a hammer is a hammer because of its relation to nails, wood, building, and so forth. Gadamer's concept of prejudice crosses back and forth between these two modes: sometimes prejudices are inarticulate, giving us our angle into things; at

²⁵ TM 268-72.

²⁶ Heidegger: 'Anything understood which is held in our fore-having and towards which we set our sights 'foresightedly', becomes conceptualisable through the interpretation. In such an interpretation, the way in which the entity we are interpreting is to be conceived can be drawn from the entity itself, or the interpretation can for the entity into concepts to which it is opposed in its manner of Being. In either case, the interpretation has already decided for a definite way of conceiving it, either with finality or with reservations; it is grounded in *something we grasp in advance* – in a *fore-conception*.' (BT 150) For an account of the origins of the productive concept of prejudice in Heidegger's thought, see Adam Sandel, *The Place of Prejudice*, Ch. 2.

other times, once they have been challenged and reformulated, prejudices are articulated and determinate, and much more closely resemble propositions. (2) The correspondence between Heidegger's 'as-structure' and Gadamer's 'prejudices' is not perfect. The as-structure is determined by my projects and concerns, as Heidegger makes clear; but for Gadamer, prejudices are the accumulation of experience – the role of my projects and concerns in my understanding of things is captured much more by his concept of 'application'. This point will be picked up below.

A few words should be said about how the ongoing process of the correction of prejudices is to be distinguished from 'falsification' (in Popper's sense) and 'fallibilism', since both have broad similarities to Gadamer's account of prejudices, but both differ from it in important ways, which may be misleading if overlooked. Falsificationism is a particular approach to the philosophy of science, which places a particular emphasis on the way theories and hypotheses must be formed: they must be cast in falsifiable terms. A statement is falsifiable if there is some way it can be put to the test, and so could potentially shown to be false. Prejudices (in Gadamer's sense) are not 'falsifiable' in this way, since they are not in the first instance statements or propositions (although, once grasped, they can be rendered in propositional form); they are not beliefs that either correspond to reality or not, but rather anticipations that guide my interpretation of phenomena, and allow phenomena to present themselves in the first place. Further, falsificationism is far more deliberate than Gadamer's concept of experience. When I set up an experiment, I am trying to precisely control which proposition (the hypothesis) is subject to question. But an experience is often not something I deliberately set about having; I have no control over what is called into question.²⁷

Fallibilism, on the other hand, is a particular stance in epistemology, which claims that all of our knowledge claims are at least potentially wrong – for

²⁷ Compare Grondin's discussion of this issue, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, p. 117. For an attempt to re-cast hermeneutics in the falsification mode, see Mantzavinos, *Naturalistic Hermeneutics* (Cambridge, 2005); and see the review by Paul Roth in *Notre Dame Philosophy Reviews* (<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24966-naturalistic-hermeneutics/>) for a critical take, which observes that hypothesis formation is too deliberate and occurs 'too late' to make sense of how understanding and meaning unfold. A parallel criticism is made by Weinsheimer, with reference to E. D. Hirsch, in *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 23n.

anything we think we know, we might always be shown to be wrong about it. Gadamer is not a fallibilist – not because he thinks there is anything that can be known with certainty, but because he presupposes an account of truth that places far less emphasis on propositions than the one presupposed by fallibilism. This is most evident in the way fallibilism generates a paradox of self-reference (if any statement may be false, might the statement ‘any statement may be false’ be false?). For Gadamer, it is not a matter of assenting to the proposition that any statement might be false, but rather a question of attitude and orientation towards one’s experiences, as we will see when we come to discuss his account of *Erfahrung*.²⁸

We always have more prejudices that inform our experience than we can ever become totally aware of.²⁹ There are two different ways we can take this. On the one hand, we might take this primarily as an expression of our limits: ‘overcoming’ all of our prejudices would be desirable, but since we are limited and finite beings this just is not possible for us. On the other hand, we can understand the idea of overcoming all prejudices as fundamentally misguided and resting on a misunderstanding.

The idea that overcoming all prejudices would be desirable but is just unachievable is a natural and obvious reading of Gadamer’s discussion of prejudices.³⁰ In un-cautious moments, Gadamer does seem to talk this way about prejudices, as for example when he says: ‘Thus we can formulate the fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics: what is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?’ (TM 278) But this would be misleading; it would be to read Gadamer in epistemological terms, and it does not allow us to make sense of his

²⁸ Cf. Nicholas White’s essay, and Gadamer’s response, in Silverman (ed.), *Gadamer and Hermeneutics* (Routledge, 1991). In his essay, White suggests that Gadamer takes over from Plato and Socrates a concern with the way human beings might always be wrong, even when they think they are right, which White equates with fallibilism; Gadamer’s response expresses puzzlement over why they are importing a recent epistemological concept into their discussion of Plato.

²⁹ ‘The prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being.’ (TM 278) Cf. PH 38: ‘What I have called historically-effected consciousness is inescapably more *being* than consciousness, and being is never fully manifest.’

³⁰ For example, Dawson, in his translator’s preface to *Praise of Theory* (p. xxix), presents such a reading.

conception of truth (which we will discuss in more detail in Chapter IV). The reason for this is as follows. If the aim is to correct all of our prejudices, this suggests that there is a conceivable (even if not, ultimately, possible) state that would consist in having only 'correct' prejudices. But this would be truth as *adequatio rei et intellectus*: our minds would have become adequate to reality. As Alasdair MacIntyre formulates it, the mind 'moves towards completing itself by becoming formally identical with the objects of its knowledge, so that it is adequate to those objects, objects that are then no longer external to it, but rather complete it'.³¹ On this reading, Gadamer would be a closet (albeit pessimistic) Thomist – and this would fail to do justice to the way he follows Heidegger in seeing truth as *aletheia*, the way things present themselves as what they are, and their simultaneous concealment, rather than as *adequatio*. As Grondin notes,³² there is some element of *adequatio* in Gadamer's account of truth, insofar as helpful prejudices are those that are adequate to the thing – but this leaves two important features of Gadamer's thinking out. (1) Gadamer's ontology of language differs significantly from the kind of ontology presupposed by *adequatio* accounts of truth (as I will argue below). (2) While helpful prejudices do their helping by being adequate to the thing, truth as *adequatio* is a state, not an event – and, as we will see, it is the *event* of truth, the 'genuine experience' in which the thing disrupts my expectations, that most interests Gadamer. So to the extent that there is an element of *adequatio* to Gadamer's account of truth, it is not what is fundamental to it.

Prejudices are better understood, then, as what allows things to show themselves. A prejudice is 'false' or 'inadequate' to the extent that it only allows the thing to show itself in a distorted fashion. For example, contemporary sexual mores can make it difficult to understand the sexual practices of the Ancient Greeks; pederasty can be too quickly mistaken for paedophilia. An appropriate prejudice, on the other hand, allows the thing to show itself as it is without distortion. By recognising the prejudice structure of understanding we prevent

³¹ See 'First Principles, Final Ends, Contemporary Issues', collected in *The Tasks of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 149.

³² *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, pp. 86-7; see also his 'Nihilistic or Metaphysical Consequences of Hermeneutics?', in Malpas & Zabala (ed.), *Consequences of Hermeneutics* (Northwestern, 2010), pp. 194-5.

them from simply operating unchecked; says Gadamer, 'a person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light' (TM 354).

Further, prejudices underlie not just *judgements* (as Gadamer's discussion of their etymology as *pre-judgements* could lead us to believe) but *experience*. Not only does that last quote show this ('what manifests itself by their light'), but Gadamer also makes this clear in a later essay: 'Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. *They are simply the conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us.*' (PH 9; emphasis added.) Prejudices, this is to say, are not merely, nor even primarily, an epistemological category for Gadamer; they are, in the first place, ontological.

However, this does introduce an ambivalence, an ambivalence that I think runs right the way through Gadamer's hermeneutics. It is the tension between the hermeneutical and phenomenological dimensions of Gadamer's thought: between a concern for the horizon in light of which things appear, and a concern for the thing itself, the phenomenon, unflagging concern for which is what gives Gadamer's hermeneutics its 'rigor' (TM 461). I will pick this up in more detail below (see Chapter IV), but it is worth flagging for now, because it underlies much of the discussion to follow.

Where do our prejudices come from? This is a question that commentators on Gadamer tend not to ask. Grondin, for example, simply takes it as given that we always already find ourselves with prejudices and anticipations; there is no ground prior to or outside of prejudice-laden understanding.³³ Similarly, Weinsheimer takes them as already given: 'We understand the world before we think about it; such pre-understanding gives rise to thought and always conditions it.'³⁴ This is true, surely; but it leaves my question unasked.

So let us ask it: where do our prejudices come from? The most obvious answer is that they derive from my own experiences and activity: I learn from my own experiences. But clearly we have not accumulated all of them through our own independent activities. If this were the only way we accumulated prejudices, our

³³ *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, pp. 79ff.

³⁴ *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, pp. 10-11.

horizons would be of a much narrower scope. Thus we must derive prejudices from our place within a historical tradition; and our sharing of them with other members of our tradition is part of what establishes the basic ground of agreement that allows elaborate forms of cooperation and shared enquiry to take place.³⁵ This dimension of our experience – the way it has been shaped and produced by a history – is invisible to any investigation into experience that takes the self-certain experiences of subjectivity as simply given. Thus Gadamer can say: ‘The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being*’ (TM 278; italics in original).

What it is that Gadamer is thinking of when he speaks of tradition is a tricky question. There are times when he seems to privilege texts as being the sole vessel of tradition (textual interpretation is certainly the dominant concern in *Truth and Method*); but if this is so, then his account would need to be supplemented with an account of the way songs, practices, rituals, institutions, sayings and so on, are also bearers of tradition.³⁶ One of the things that is striking is that, in the central discussion of tradition and horizon (TM II.4 [B(iv)]; pp. 299-306), Gadamer discusses in detail the way our historical horizon gives us our perspective on things, and how historical consciousness involves grasping the horizon of the past, he does not discuss how one actually *acquires* this horizon. He discusses the implications of being ‘children of our time’ (Hegel), but does not discuss how we become so. This is an important issue, because there is a difference between conceiving of the tradition in broadly idealist terms – the tradition consists in *ideas* that are passed down (perhaps by being contained in the language);³⁷ and conceiving it in materialist terms – as embodied in our practices, institutions and forms of life.

³⁵ See, for example, PH 7: “I” and “Thou” do not exist as ‘isolated, substantial realities’; to say “Thou” presupposes ‘a common understanding [that] always precedes these situations’.

³⁶ Gadamer moved more in this direction in his later essays. See, for example, ‘Towards a Phenomenology of Language and Ritual’, in Lawrence Schmidt (ed.), *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*.

³⁷ P Christopher Smith, in *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude* (Fordham, 1991), presents a strongly ‘idealist’ reading of Gadamer.

I would suggest that, while Gadamer does not fit comfortably into either camp, examining him from the 'materialist' perspective is a fruitful undertaking. It is primarily his concept of *play* that matters here. A game, Gadamer notes, does not exist independently of the players; it only 'reaches presentation through the players' (TM 103). But, nonetheless, a game cannot be understood merely by the subjective perspectives of the players themselves. Play is not something one does, but rather something one *participates in* (TM 104). I do this by submitting myself to the game; this is not a passive submission, since in order to play I have to be active, but my activity is constrained or enabled by the rules of the game, the activity of the other players, and so on (TM 107). This is why Gadamer says that 'the actual subject of play' is not the players but 'the play itself' (TM 104). Playing is both passivity and activity: 'all playing is being played' (TM 106). In play, 'the player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him' (TM 109).

Thus we can think of play in connection with the way in which someone picks up the horizon and prejudices of the tradition of which they are a part. A baby is not yet an historical being. But as we are raised, we are taught how to play the various 'games' of our society – how to speak the language, what the proper manners are at the dinner table, how to do well in school, how to advance one's career, how to lead a good life, and so on – but we are not, as it were, taught all of the *rules*. By 'rules' I mean not only 'moral rules' that legislate what is permissible and impermissible in the various games, but also the underlying rationales of these games, why we engage in them, what their broader purpose is, and so on. These *inarticulate* rules, those things implied by and assumed in the routine of our daily lives, how we interact with others, the structure of our society, the expressions and pieces of wisdom that are part of our linguistic heritage, and so on, come to shape what we take to be important and our view of what matters. It is from this process that we derive that implicit understanding that Gadamer refers to when he says: 'Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live' (TM 278).

I will leave it at this, however, as there is not enough in *Truth and Method* to settle this matter decisively. The sketch I have presented is, I think, the most plausible way of reading Gadamer. However, as we will see below, this reading

connects in an important way with the solution to a puzzle concerning his concept of prejudice; but, as we will see at the end of the chapter, it is also implicated in a basic objection to his ontology of language.

In any case, it is important to emphasise that the tradition is not monolithic or univocal; Gadamer speaks of the way the past addresses us with many voices, and these multifarious voices make up the tradition (TM 285). If it were univocal, it could not pose the challenge to us it so obviously does, and the difference that generates dialogue and discussion would disappear: we would fall into what Henry James calls ‘unspeakable harmony’.³⁸

The shaping of consciousness by history Gadamer refers to as the principle of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*: ‘consciousness of being effected by history’ (Weinsheimer and Marshall), or ‘historically effected-effective consciousness’ (Smith). The immediate point of this concept is to highlight the naivety of an approach to understanding anything – especially an historical text – that simply takes the text as it appears to us. When we do this, we ignore the way we do not approach the text as neutral observers but as historical beings whose interests have already been shaped by the very same history of which the text is a part (in the case of texts from our own tradition, in any case); and in this way we allow this effect of history to simply happen unmonitored and unchecked. Gadamer also refers to this as our ‘hermeneutical situation’ (TM 301); and it is our hermeneutical situation that ‘determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there – in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon – when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth’ (TM 300). Becoming aware of our hermeneutical situation means becoming aware of the way we have been affected by history. The concept of prejudice, then, is an attempt to explicate how my consciousness is affected by being a part of some tradition. *Prejudice is the presence of the tradition in the individual*.³⁹ And it is because a community more or less shares the same

³⁸ Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima*, Ch. 6.

³⁹ This is an essential point to note. Gadamer sometimes sounds as though he is trying to eliminate the subject, and thus attracts criticism that attempts to mobilise phenomenological considerations against him (e.g. Hans-Herbert Kögler (2014), ‘A Critique of Dialogue in Philosophical Hermeneutics’, *Journal of Dialogue Studies*, 2, 1). For an attempt to mobilise the concept of play to counter this anti-subjective tendency, see Fleming Lebech (2006), ‘The

background of prejudices that they inhabit a shared world – as Hegel puts it, ‘common sense’ is realised through each member of a community having a particular set of prejudices (PR 317). Similarly, for Hegel the state does not exist independently of the people who live in it – nor do they exist independently of the state. The same basic principle is true of Gadamer’s concept of tradition.⁴⁰

There is, however, a tension between two aspects of the concept of prejudice: (1) prejudices are those anticipations that make experience possible, and (2) prejudices are derived from the tradition of which we are a part.⁴¹ Gadamer himself yokes both of these together: ‘The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition’ (TM 293). But this can only lead us into difficulties. The first, and most notorious, is that it seems to reduce human beings to mere functions of the tradition of which they are a part. I do not want to concern myself with this objection here,⁴² but rather to turn to a second objection: such an account of prejudices leaves Gadamer’s account of experience unintelligible.

Ordinary experience, for Gadamer, proceeds dialectically: my experiences are always guided by my anticipations, which are often more or less fulfilled; sometimes my anticipations are thwarted, in which case I become alienated from my experience, and (temporarily) unable to make sense of it – I am also thrown back on myself by the realisation that there is more to the thing than the way I understand it; and then, in a movement of ‘reconciliation’, my understanding of the thing is deepened and I no longer feel alienated from my experience of it, and my understanding of my own finitude is also deepened.⁴³ My anticipations were guided by my prejudices, as we have seen; but now that they have passed

Concept of the Subject in the Philosophical Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer’, *International Journal of Philosophy Studies*, 14, 2, pp. 221-236.

⁴⁰ John Arthos calls this Gadamer’s ‘communal ontology’: see Arthos (2000) ‘Who are We and Who am I? Gadamer’s Communal Ontology as Palimpsest’, *Communication Studies*, 51, 1, pp. 15-34.

⁴¹ This tension is noted, with reference to the concept of play, by Bernet (2005), ‘The Subject’s Participation in the Game of Truth’, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 58, 4, p. 793.

⁴² Although I will take up a version of this objection below.

⁴³ To foreshadow what is to come, the major element of Gadamer’s concept of *Erfahrung* is that it breaks with this tradition in which experience is seen as contributing to the concept; instead, an *Erfahrung* calls the concept into question.

through the dialectic of experience, and have come out the other side changed – for surely my anticipations next time will be different, in light of my experiences this time. Now, if my anticipations are different, is that because my prejudices have been revised, or are my anticipations now based on something other than my prejudices? This dilemma will force us, one way or the other, to revise Gadamer's account: for, if my prejudices can be revised, then it is not totally accurate to say (as some commentators do) that they are simply the 'traditional beliefs' I share with my contemporaries, since prejudices revised in the light of *my* experiences will not be the same as those of my contemporaries; and, if we want to retain the term 'prejudice' exclusively for those traditional beliefs we all share, my anticipations are now based on something un-theorised in Gadamer's account.

The problem emerges because 'prejudice' is trying to do too much without a subtle enough analysis to support it. At times, Gadamer wants it to be that which provides the ground for the anticipations that guide experience; at other times, he wants prejudices to form the basis for an account of how we are historically shaped. Of course, these are not contradictory aims, but they do need to be carefully related for the reasons just given; prejudices cannot simply do both at once.

Above I argued that we should understand play as the medium by which we come to acquire the prejudices of our time; and it should now be clear how this can help to mediate the distinction between 'traditional beliefs' and prejudices that are the product of my own experience. If the process of acquisition of 'traditional beliefs' is *play*, then the process of their acquisition is no different to those of any other prejudice. In fact, it helps us to see the way in which these two kinds of prejudice, which I have separated, are actually deeply entwined. After all, it is only by engaging with people that I acquire and refine my idea of a 'person'; I learn what a 'supermarket' is by going to some particular supermarket; and I acquire my basic ideas about what is important in life by being inducted in the pre-existing projects of my family, community and society. As my prejudices are transformed through my own experience, it is not as though they become radically other through this process – they remain rooted in the broader prejudices of the community of which one is a part. Even if one

comes to totally repudiate some traditional prejudice, this leaves its mark on the prejudice one comes to have as that from which it is distinct.

One way of elaborating this relation between my inherited prejudices and those prejudices that have been transformed by my own experience is in terms of Heidegger's distinction between *das Man* and that which I have made my own.⁴⁴ For Heidegger, every one of us is constituted in part by how we think 'one ought to be'; we have a common and unreflective sense of how things should be and what one should do; and our task as individuated, finite beings is to come to take over *as our own* the projects and priorities that matter to us, rather than remaining beholden to what we vaguely feel that we should do or care about. Applied to prejudices, this becomes an enlightenment demand that one see for oneself whether one's vague and inherited expectations about things are actually borne out by the phenomena.

This is also central to the way we understand individual persons. Whenever I encounter any particular entity, if I understand it I understand it as a particular of some *type*: a particular that corresponds to no type that I am aware of, that bears not even the faintest resemblance – no matter how loose – to any known type, must appear to me entirely unintelligible. There are a range of categories under which I might understand an individual person. First of all, I could understand their need to eat and defecate in terms of their biological reality – which is to say that they are a human, and humans need to eat and to defecate. Similarly, I might make sense of something they are saying or doing in terms of the culture to which they belong. But as we get closer to understanding someone as an individual, rather than as an instantiation of a type, we start comparing them to *other people and characters* with which we are familiar. Thus some middle-aged women remind me of my mother; and when somebody else asks why I think this person has done some particular thing, I will reply along the lines of 'Well, when my mother does such-and-such, it is usually because ...' Other people, when I first meet them, might remind me of my childhood friend, or of Lady Macbeth, or of Don Quixote. We can see from this two things: (1) when I do not know someone very well, I will tend to make sense of them in terms of other people (real or fictional) I have some better understanding of; (2) when I do

⁴⁴ BT §27

know somebody well (and this is not to say that I need some total or complete understanding of them) they will then serve as a 'character type' in light of which I will interpret others. But what this then implies is that, as I get to know some particular person well, I will need to refer less and less to others to make sense of them, and will become increasingly able to make sense of them *in terms of themselves*; they may even become a model by which I start making sense of others. Thus Gadamer's concept of prejudice, if divorced from the idea that prejudices consist only of 'traditional beliefs', provides us with a fine model for how we come to understand individual others.

Now, over time and with experience, my anticipations tend to get better and more accurate, as my understanding improves. But two things remain un-theorised and un-illuminated in the account so far: first, 'heightened' experiences, ones that stand out and serve to reflect my ordinary experiences back to me and reinforce them; and experiences that do *not* go according to my anticipations and expectations – particularly, experiences that defy my expectations and so call my prejudices and projects into question. The first of these is Gadamer's concept of *Erlebnis*, the second his concept of *Erfahrung*. But before we turn to these, we need to further develop one of the most important features of his account of ordinary experience: that it is *linguistic*. While prejudices constitute what we might call the 'subjective' horizon, the way the world appears *to me*, language constitutes the 'world' horizon, the horizon that pre-exists me and into which I grow.

2. Language as Experience and as Ontology

'Who thinks of "language" already moves beyond subjectivity.'⁴⁵

'Language', Gadamer announces in one of his chapter headings, is 'the medium of hermeneutic experience' (TM III.5 1); in a later chapter, he tells us that all experience occurs within the 'world horizon of language' (TM 447). The

⁴⁵ Gadamer (2000), 'Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity, Subject and Person', trans. P Adamson and D Vessey, *Continental Philosophy Review*, 33, p. 286.

essential chapter on this topic is 'Language as experience of the world' (TM III.5 3[a]). I will first give a synoptic account of what 'linguistic experience' means, before turning to Gadamer's text to spell it out (2[a]). Following that, I will move to Gadamer's ontology of language, exploring its relation to *adequatio* and *aletheia*, and what Bernard Williams has called 'the absolute conception of the world' (2[b]), and then examining what it might be to take reality as linguistic (2[c]).

For Gadamer, our experience of the world is always already linguistically shaped. I do not first experience bundles of sense-data which I then apply linguistic categories to; I experience chairs, tables, scuba diving, works of art, conservative Prime Ministers, and so on.⁴⁶ While I do not always immediately recognise these things as what they are, such experiences stand out for precisely that reason, as being exceptions to the general rule that experiences are on the whole always already linguistically understood; and, further, note that resolving my confusion about what something is means recognising that it is a *chair* or a *conservative budget*. In other words, the horizon in light of which things appear to me is *linguistic*; and it is also the horizon within which I myself appear, and in light of which I can understand myself as *studious*, *bored*, or *going to the shops*.⁴⁷

We might contrast with this Samuel Beckett's character Molloy, who spends the first part of the novel narrating what could loosely be called series of events from his past. A few things are striking: first, Molloy makes explicit towards the end of his narrative that he is having to impose meaning on his past, ascribing projects and motivations to his past self that, he claims, were no such thing at the time – they were, rather, just vague impulses, snatches of half-forgotten plans, and half-obsured images. It is only by misrepresenting these experiences that

⁴⁶ As Weinsheimer notes, for Gadamer perception is 'always meaningful: we do not hear pure sounds but always a car in the street, a baby crying; we do not see pure colours and shapes but always a face, a knife, a wreath of smoke. Perception is instinct with meaning. Perception understands, and understanding involves the construal of something *as* something.' (*Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 94.)

⁴⁷ Cf. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1:57-59, in which he discusses the intelligibility of actions. Where Gadamer differs from Ricoeur here is that Ricoeur's discussion is coming from cultural anthropology, and is thus thinking primarily of symbols and their structural relations; Gadamer's emphasis is on language, which is always the language of conversation, and thus broader and more inchoate. The basic point is the same: the paradigm of human activity is symbolically or linguistically mediated, and hence meaningful. Gadamer's ontology of language is making a larger claim, that not only all activity but all of human experience is like this.

they can be narrated. Second, the Molloy being narrated struggles to make himself understood to other characters, and struggles to understand them in turn, and one gets the sense that this is not least because he tends to hear just sounds instead of words – rendering those sounds into words costs him a painful effort. This feature is particularly striking, since the word is the primary example of the incarnation of language, language made material, both for Gadamer and for the Christian tradition on which he draws (as we will see). In the spoken word, sound becomes the bearer of meaning – indeed it *becomes* meaning, since to call it a ‘bearer’ suggests that it is bearing something independent of it, as though one could separate out the meaning from the sound in anything more than an analytic way. Molloy’s experiences, then – at least those of Molloy being narrated – are experiences more or less alienated from language; while they still have *some* kind of meaning, they are somehow dumb and mute. The Molloy that narrates the story seems far more articulate, and it is perhaps the irony of the novel that, while it is about the experience of a character who does not experience the world entirely linguistically, it is a novel, and thus exists purely in the medium of language. Molloy’s experiences have come into language, but too late.

(a) Experience as linguistic

One of the first things to note about Gadamer’s conception of language is that it is not tied to any *particular* language. To have the capacity for language is to have a certain distance from the environment in which we live such that it can appear in a particular way (TM 441). An ‘environment’ here is a context, with which I am trying to cope and so engage with in a variety of ways; what distinguishes humans from other animals is that we are not *embedded* in that context, but rather have a reflective distance and freedom from it, an abstractive capacity; Gadamer calls this the freedom to give names. The things in our environment, by being brought into language, are allowed to appear as something more than just what they are, immediately, for me: I can recognise that this is not just an obstacle in my way, but a pillar from an ancient temple.

Language and world are equiprimordial concepts for Gadamer; to have one is to have the other.

Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a *world* at all. The world as world exists for man as for no other creature that is in the world. But this world is verbal in nature. [...] Not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it. Thus, that language is originally human means at the same time that man's being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic. (TM 440)

Each natural language presents a world. The world of the Greeks, for example, which was constituted by and embodied in their language, was in some sense different to the modern world. But the multiplicity of 'world views' are not exclusive of each other: for Gadamer, while in one sense the Greek world is different from the modern world, in another sense it is the same world that is presented differently in each.⁴⁸ To have one language is also to possess the possibility of learning another; and learning another language does not lead to some kind of mental schism such that I oscillate between two incompatible world views – rather, learning another language broadens my view of the world. We will need to clarify what this means.

[1] [T]he verbal world, in which we live, is not a barrier that prevents knowledge of being-in-itself, but fundamentally embraces everything in which our insight can be enlarged and deepened. (TM 444)

⁴⁸ Cf. Robert Dostal, 'Heidegger's Hermeneutics, Gadamer's Hermeneutics', collected in Bowler & Farin (eds.), *Hermeneutical Heidegger* (Northwestern University Press, 2016), p. 295.

[2] The multiplicity of these worldviews does not involve any relativisation of the world. Rather what the world is is not different from the views in which it presents itself. (TM 444)

[3] Seen phenomenologically, the “thing-in-itself” is, as Husserl has shown, nothing but the continuity with which the various perceptual perspectives on objects shade into one another.... In a way similar to perception we can speak of the “linguistic shadings” that the world undergoes in different language-worlds. But there remains a characteristic difference: every shading of the object of perception is exclusively distinct from every other one, and each helps co-constitute the “thing-in-itself” as the shadings of verbal worldviews, each worldview can be extended into every other. It can understand and comprehend, from within itself the “view” of the world presented in another language. (TM 444-5)

It is worth pausing here to emphasise that language is to be understood as a *horizon*. Brice Wachterhauser has argued, from these three cited passages, that for Gadamer the ‘real world [...] *presents itself finitely* through the lens of linguistically mediated dialogue’.⁴⁹ This reading could then be supported by Gadamer’s appeal (TM 445-6) to the perspectival nature of our experience of the sun setting, and his insistence that the ‘world in itself’ is independent of human activity and cognition of it (TM 444).

Nonetheless, it seems to me that Gadamer misleads us with these examples; while the sun may continue to exist after humanity ceases to, *human* worlds will not do so – and it is humans and human worlds that are of concern to the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Let us leave aside for now the question of whether

⁴⁹ Wachterhauser, ‘Gadamer’s Realism’, in Wachterhauser (ed.) *Hermeneutics and Truth* (Northwestern, 1994), p. 156. Coltman seems to assume a similar view when he writes that Gadamer ‘sensitises us to the fact that our finitude precludes the possibility of our ever achieving a perfectly “objective” or “true” reading [of a text]’ (*The Language of Hermeneutics* [SUNY, 1998], p. ix).

Gadamer is a 'perspectival realist' about the physical world;⁵⁰ what is his position on the human world? In the chapter from which Wachterhauser's quotes are taken (TM III 3 (a), 'Language as experience of the world'), Gadamer notes that the sciences are a particular way of engaging with the world, which is only possible within the broader horizon of our linguistic experience of the world (TM 447). This broader horizon he calls the 'world horizon of language', to express the intimate relation between language and the world. There is an unhelpful ambiguity in the way he uses 'world' throughout this chapter: sometimes it means '[human] world' and other times '[physical] world' (both uses appear on TM 444).⁵¹ The reason for the ambiguity is that Gadamer wants to do away with the strict opposition between these two senses of world: it is always *the* world that appears in every human world. Nonetheless, the distinction between the human world and the world purged of human meanings is a central one for our scientific account of the world, and we will discuss it in more detail below.

What is the human relationship to the world? It is characterised by a kind of distance, Gadamer says – to have a world is to have a distance and freedom from one's surroundings such that 'one can present [what one encounters] to oneself as it is' (TM 440-1). One does not just respond to one's environment; one can recognise it as what it is. This distance is what enables man to have language (TM 441), and to have language is to have a (the) world (TM 449). The major feature of this is to be able to recognise and communicate matters of fact: 'Whereas the call of animals induces particular behaviour in the members of the species, men's coming to a linguistic understanding with one another through the logos reveals the existent itself' (TM 442). However, the capacity to make assertions about matters of fact is not the most fundamental linguistic phenomenon: any statement about some matter of fact or other is asserted or disputed, this occurs against a background of agreement: 'Reaching an understanding places a subject matter before those communicating like a

⁵⁰ However, his comment that 'Each science, as a science, has in advance projected a field of objects such that to know them is to govern them' (TM 449) does have an anti-realist ring to it. We will pick this up below.

⁵¹ Cf. TM 441: '[M]an's relation to the world is characterised by *freedom from environment*. [...] To rise above the pressure of what impinges on us from the world means to have language and to have "world".' We will discuss this below.

disputed object set between them. Thus the world is the common ground, trodden by none and recognised by all, uniting all who talk to one another.' (TM 443) The point Gadamer wants to insist on is that any dispute about some particular thing occurs against a shared background.

Gadamer is more helpful when he refers to this 'common ground' as the 'world horizon of language', and we should think of it as precisely that – a horizon. Wachterhauser is misled by Gadamer's appeal to Husserl in [3]: language is not best understood as a 'lens', through which we finite beings squint at reality; rather, it should be understood hermeneutically as the *horizon* within which things can appear.

What is a horizon? Recalling my discussion of Husserl at the beginning of this chapter, we can turn to the two key discussions of the concept in *Truth and Method*: first TM II 3 (a) (pp. 237ff.); second, in the discussion of the principle of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (pp. 301ff.). In the first of these, the discussion is of Husserl and the life-world; and Gadamer notes that 'everything that is given as existent is given in terms of a world and hence brings the world horizon with it' (TM 238). For humans, as historical creatures, this means that our horizon is always the historical life-world. The life-world can be thematised, and made the object of a discussion; but it cannot be made an object, in the sense that I can stand over against it as an outside observer. It is rather the 'pre-given basis of all experience' (TM 239).

In the second of these discussions, the emphasis is on the way a horizon comes with a perspective: to have a horizon is to know 'the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small' (TM 301-2): in other words, it is to have things appear in a particular way. Understanding others means trying to work out the horizon in light of which they are making sense of things; understanding historical periods means to try to reconstruct the historical horizon (TM 302).⁵² This discussion culminates with Gadamer's famous concept of the 'fusion of horizons', that process by which the horizon of the other whom I am trying to understand fuses with my own by calling my prejudices into question (TM 305). The horizon, then, is of that which

⁵² We will return to a point Gadamer raises in this connection, namely his concern that 'understanding the other' in this way quickly falls into psychologising him or her.

forms the background of all of my experiences, and in light of which particular things appear in particular ways. To say that experience occurs within the 'world horizon of language' means that language plays a fundamental role in the way things appear.

The key difference between language-as-horizon and language-as-lens is an ontological one. If language is a lens that allows the finite presentation of 'the world', then the world is the way it is and different historical periods have access to it from different perspectives. However, if language is a horizon, then we are not seeing finite presentations of the way the world is anyway, but rather things in the world, by being brought into language, undergo a change. They do not become other than themselves in doing so (as Gadamer makes clear in [1] and [2]), but they nonetheless become more than they were or would otherwise be 'in themselves'. An example of this is Heidegger's discussion of the Greek temple: it comes into being and is inextricably bound up with its world; while that Greek world has faded, the temple remains, and attempting to understand the temple points us back to the world of which it was a part.⁵³

Section II of Gadamer's essay 'The Relevance of the Beautiful' is significant in this context. There, Gadamer discusses art as 'symbol', and the function of representation. The point he wants to insist on is that a work of art – insofar as it is a work of art – does not merely represent something beyond itself, but rather makes that thing present: 'the work of art does not simply refer to something, because what it refers to is actually there' (RB 35). The work brings about an 'increase in being': the work manifests something, increase its being. However, Gadamer insists this is peculiar to art, and is what distinguishes art from mere making. This seems to me to be a result of his particular purposes in that essay, in which he is at pains to work out what is common to art *as distinct from* other forms of production. The point he insists on is that the tool is replaceable, while the work is not. But when the tool is made it is still brought into being; Gadamer's point is that the tool's being is not irreplaceable in the way the work of art's is. One might put it like this: for Gadamer's ontology, the work of art is more real than the hammer.

⁵³ 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. Krell (2nd ed.; Routledge, 2011), p. 107: the temple 'opens up a world' and 'first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves'.

The human world is not something that exists independently of humans, as it would have to be if the idea of looking at it finitely through a lens were to make sense; it is, rather, bound up with our linguistic capacity. Gadamer tells us that 'language is by nature the language of conversation', and human communities are always linguistic (TM 443). What sustains this linguistic mode of appearance, in which things can appear as more than they are 'in themselves', is the possibility of agreeing with and understanding each other in our judgements of these things. This is part of why agreement is so important for Gadamer. The absolute conception of the world (i.e. the world conceived of in a way that is divorced from human meanings)⁵⁴ could never disclose to us that a Greek temple is a Greek temple – and yet it *is* a Greek temple. When things appear within the world, against a linguistic horizon, language becomes part of their constitution: they become something that does not exist outside of language, but discovering them as such requires participation in the language that constitutes them. An example Gadamer employs of this kind of participation is that of a game of tennis: even the spectators are participants (watch how they crick their necks as they follow the ball back and forth over the net), and if they were not participants they could not grasp what was going on (RB 24).

An example from Dilthey can also help illuminate what is going on here.

The fixed order of behaviour within a culture makes it possible for greetings or bows to signify, by their nuances, a certain mental attitude to other people and to be understood as doing so. In different countries the crafts developed particular procedures and particular instruments for special purposes; when, therefore, the craftsman uses a hammer or saw, his purpose is intelligible to us.⁵⁵

Thus certain forms of behaviour, by being part of the life-world, part of our linguistic horizon, part of 'the fixed order of behaviour within a culture' (in the case of this example, these all come to the same thing), become possible: possible to perform, and possible to understand. One cannot bow if bowing is not a part of

⁵⁴ We will discuss this below.

⁵⁵ Dilthey, 'The understanding of other people and their expressions', in Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, p. 222.

the world in which one lives – I could bend forward at the waist, certainly, but I would not be bowing. Similarly, that a tool is a part of the world as performing such-and-such a purpose means both that I, as a craftsman, can recognise it as such and put it to use, and that others will recognise what I am doing.

The world that is constituted by language does not exist outside of human history. Gadamer is very clear on this when discussing his claim that ‘Being that can be understood is language’ (TM 470). On the very next page, discussing his break with Hegel and his ‘idealistic spiritualism’ and his ‘metaphysics of infinity’, Gadamer claims that historical language, which is what constitutes the world, is not the working out of the language of being:

The language that things have – whatever kind of things they may be – is not the *logos ousias* [language of being], and it is not self-fulfilled in the self-contemplation of an infinite intellect; it is the language that our finite, historical nature apprehends when we learn to speak. This is true of the language of the text handed down to us in tradition, and that is why it was necessary to have a truly historical hermeneutics. It is as true of the experience of art as of the experience of history; in fact, the concepts of “art” and “history” are modes of understanding that emerge from the universal mode of hermeneutical being as forms of hermeneutical experience. (TM 471)

In other words, the world that humans experience – *being that can be understood* – is constituted by language; but it is not the language of being, nor is it working towards such.⁵⁶ It is a language that has come to be historically through contingent processes and pressures; there is no necessity to it dictated by the things themselves; rather, the things themselves become something more than they would otherwise be by being brought into language. Gadamer resists on the one side those in the tradition from Plato to Schopenhauer (and beyond), who

⁵⁶ In this I am committed to a slightly different reading of ‘Being that can be understood is language’ than that presented by Grondin, ‘Nihilistic or Metaphysical Consequences of Hermeneutics?’, pp. 198-9. I will discuss this below. This also rules out what Kögler calls the ‘Platonist-realist’ reading of Gadamer (which Kögler also rejects), that there is a linguistic structure to being (‘things *have* a language’) that human language approximates (*The Power of Dialogue*, trans. Paul Hendrickson [MIT Press, 1996], p. 60).

distinguish appearance from reality with a radical break – the world of appearance and experience *is* the real world, *is* being, and is not mere appearance; and on the other side he resists the tradition that runs from Plato to Hegel (and beyond), which sees the world of appearance as a manifestation of an underlying *logos ousias* that it is the task of knowledge to approximate. As Gianni Vattimo formulates it, Gadamer's ontology does not suggest that we, as finite beings, cannot know the reality beyond our horizon; rather, 'things are what they truly are, only within the realms of interpretation and language'.⁵⁷

(b) Language as Ontology

The precise nature of Gadamer's ontology has been a matter of some controversy. We might delimit three major camps. On the one hand, those like Gianni Vattimo want to urge that language goes 'all the way down': Gadamer's phrase 'being that can be understood is language' implies that language constitutes the world, and that we are always thus within language, and the idea of language being adequate to some thing *outside* of language to which it might be adequate is rejected as incoherent.⁵⁸ On the other hand, there are those like the Brice Wachterhauser of 1994, who read Gadamer as being concerned with the finite, historical presentation of essences that are themselves outside of history (justice and the like).⁵⁹ And finally (on, as it were, the third hand), there are those like Jean Grondin who read Gadamer as a fairly straightforward realist, for whom truth is a matter of *adequatio*.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Vattimo, 'Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology', in Malpas, Arnschwald & Kertscher (eds.), *Gadamer's Century* (MIT Press, 2002), p. 301.

⁵⁸ Vattimo acknowledges that this requires reading Gadamer against his intentions, since Gadamer wants to employ a distinction between the human and the natural sciences (a distinction I intend to maintain): 'Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology', p. 301.

⁵⁹ 'Gadamer's Realism', in *Hermeneutics and Truth*. I have partially dealt with this reading above.

⁶⁰ 'Metaphysical or Nihilistic Consequences of Hermeneutics?', p. 195. Wachterhauser also seems to hold this kind of position in later pieces, such as 'Getting it Right: Relativism, Realism and Truth', in Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge, 2002), in which he is less interested in metaphysical essences and more interested in truths about the world, such as those established in the sciences. Cf. his lengthy discussion of traditions as 'normative spaces', in connection with John McDowell, in that essay. Dostal himself seems to hold something like Grondin's view – in a recent essay he is at pains to insist that 'Being that can be understood is language' means only that *understanding* (not being) is linguistic, and therefore partial and perspectival: see his 'Heidegger's Hermeneutics, Gadamer's Hermeneutics', p. 295.

It is Grondin's position that most interests me here. He quite rightly rejects the 'language all the way down' reading of Gadamer, by pointing to a few key passages of *Truth and Method* in which Gadamer quite clearly rejects the idea that everything is language, that everything is (merely) historical.⁶¹ Among them is the following passage from *Truth and Method*:

A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not borne out by the things themselves.

Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed 'by the things themselves', is the constant task of understanding. (TM 270; quoted on p. 195)

Grondin notes: 'It appears obvious that Gadamer follows here the classical notion of truth as *adaequatio*, which nihilistic hermeneutics wants to jettison: to be sure, our interpretations have an anticipatory and even projective nature (who ever denied this?), but these fore-understandings can be confirmed, or rebutted, by the things themselves in the unfolding of any serious interpretation.' This is followed through by Grondin's reading of Gadamer's dictum that 'Being that can be understood is language'. For Grondin, this means two things: first, that Being *can* be understood; second, that what is understood *is Being*.⁶² Thus: 'Gadamer's grand thesis is thus that language is not only a (historical) creation of our mind (or our species), and it can of course be considered that way by linguistics, but it is first and foremost the language of Being, it is about Being as it unfolds itself and can be understood in our language, which is always extensible and open to new ways of Being, since it can never be exhausted once and for all by finite beings.'⁶³

Grondin's reading is correct insofar as it goes, but it does not go far enough. *Adequatio* does indeed remain a part of Gadamer's account of truth, but it is not the entirety of it. As I have argued above, Gadamer's account of being-as-language is *not* exhausted by understanding language as the language of being – this is, as I have shown, a position Gadamer rejects in his rejection of Hegel: 'The

⁶¹ See 'Metaphysical or Nihilistic ...', pp. 194-7.

⁶² 'Metaphysical or Nihilistic ...', pp. 198-9.

⁶³ 'Metaphysical or Nihilistic...', p. 199.

language that things have – whatever kind of things they may be – is not the *logos ousias* [language of being], and it is not self-fulfilled in the self-contemplation of an infinite intellect; it is the language that our finite, historical nature apprehends when we learn to speak.’ (TM 471)

One of the features of an account of truth as *adequatio*, as formulated by Aquinas, is that the mind’s adequacy to its object is *only half of the account*.⁶⁴ The second half is that the object is what it is by its approximation to the idea in the mind of God: a tree is a tree insofar as it best fulfils the idea of a tree, and a bad tree to the extent that it does not.⁶⁵ Without this second half of the account, the question arises: what is it that makes the thing the thing it is?⁶⁶ On what basis is it the thing that it is? How does it resist my concept-forming activities, such that it is not merely what I want it to be? The problem is compounded when we turn from natural kinds to the human world: what is it that makes chairs chairs? Tables tables? Is a wastepaper basket itself?

There are two inadequate responses to this question. The first is the reductive response: there are no such things as tables, chairs or wastepaper baskets; nor are there trees, rocks or planets. There are only atoms in the void; all else is illusion. This is inadequate in that it does not allow for ‘getting things right’ in most of the domains that we care about: it makes a difference to me whether there is a chair nearby to sit on, or a tree nearby to sit under, and this is not an arbitrary preference for some collections of atoms over others. Someone who wanders about insisting that there are not *really* cups, chairs, best friends, the World Bank, etc., is not in a position to make any sense of their experiences or their projects; and there is an air of self-delusion about them, akin to that of the professor in Kierkegaard’s joke: he has transcended time to understand the world from the viewpoint of eternity, but he still shows up on the right day to collect his paycheque.⁶⁷ So the second inadequate response is to claim that there are two levels of truth: the ultimate truth is that there are no such things as

⁶⁴ See Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (Routledge, 2001), Ch. 1, esp. pp. 9-10, as well as MacIntyre, ‘First Principles, Final Ends, Contemporary Issues’.

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q. 1 a. 4: ‘[A] thing is said to be true principally because of its order to the truth of the divine intellect rather than because of its relation to the truth of the human intellect.’ (V. J. Bourke trans.)

⁶⁶ Milbank and Pickstock argue this point in the first chapter of *Truth in Aquinas*.

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge, 2009), p. 162.

chairs, tables, trees, etc.; but there is a superficial kind of truth, responding to human concerns, and on this level there are indeed chairs, trees, and so on. But this, too, is inadequate, for it displaces the realm of 'real' truth into a domain that is largely indifferent to me (it makes little difference to my concerns and projects whether the ultimate constituents of reality are atoms or Ideas), and renders the domain that actually matters to me the realm of not-really-true.⁶⁸

Gadamer is fruitfully read as responding to these issues. His ontology is a way of accounting for the reality of the world of our experiences (and thus resisting the reductive approach) without appeal to a transcendent entity that makes the world what it is (*Geist* for Hegel, God for Aquinas). Thus I argued in the preceding section that Gadamer's account of the ontology of language is that it makes things *more* than they would otherwise be; that a thing, by being brought into language, becomes itself. The young Walter Benjamin says something similar when he claims that man, by naming things, completes them;⁶⁹ but for Benjamin, like Aquinas, it is God who stands behind things as a kind of guarantee.⁷⁰ This inner connection between word and thing, between language and world, is vital – the alternative is an entirely alienated world in which, in the phrase of Beckett's Molloy, there are 'no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names.'⁷¹

⁶⁸ For a similar line of argument against reductive accounts of truth, see Stanley Rosen, 'Are we such stuff as dreams are made on?', in Malpas et al. (ed.), *Gadamer's Century*; and Linda Alcoff, *Real Knowing* (Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 76. Compare also Husserl's comment on this issue: 'The tradesman on the market has his truth – the truth of the market. Is that not, taken in its relations, a good truth and the best of which he may avail himself? Is it the mere semblance of truth, because the scientist, forming his judgments with respect to other relations, other goals and ideas, seeks a different sort of truths and because these truths, though instrumental within a broader range of application, happen to be unfit just for the purposes of the market?' (Quoted in Helmut Kuhn, 'The Phenomenological Concept of Horizon', collected in Farber (ed.), *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl* (Harvard, 1940) pp. 106-107.)

⁶⁹ Or, as Eagleton formulates Aquinas's position, 'The world somehow becomes more real in the act of being understood' (*Reason, Faith, and Revolution* [Yale, 2009], p. 78); cf. Milbank and Pickstock: 'adequating is an event which realises or fulfils the being of things known, just as much as it fulfils truth in the knower's mind' (*Truth in Aquinas*, p. 5).

⁷⁰ See 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (Harvard, 1999). For some discussion of this essay, see Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Belknap Press, 2014), pp. 87-90.

⁷¹ My interest in the following discussion has some proximity to, but is distinct from, the 'holism and hermeneutics' debates of the 70s and 80s. Where those debates focused on the scope of hermeneutics, and the difference between the human and natural sciences, my interest is in the *reality* of the human world vs. that of the world uncovered by the natural sciences. Naturally, there is some crossover of topics. For a brief overview of that debate, see Alcoff, *Real Knowing*, pp. 71-5.

Two things are important: as Grondin has shown, for Gadamer things provide resistance to our intellectual activity (Gadamer, in *Truth and Method* at least, is not so interested in our practical activity); but, as I have attempted to show, what things are cannot be established by appeal to what they would be if not brought into language. Or: not *all* things can be thought of in this way. For, as Vattimo notes, Gadamer preserves the distinction between the human and the natural sciences, with hermeneutical concerns applying only to the former.⁷²

This distinction can be brought out with reference to a distinction Bernard Williams introduced in his book on Descartes, and has subsequently defended in a number of places.⁷³ This is between the ‘absolute conception of the world’, and the world as we experience it. We arrive at the absolute conception, Williams thinks, by pursuing the question of what it is to know something, and what disagreement means: if to know something means to have grasped some state of affairs that was the case anyway (‘anyway’ in the sense of ‘whether or not I know it’), then some account needs to be given of disagreement: whether it is simply a case of one person being right, and the other wrong, or whether both are correct but just describing different aspects of the same reality. If this dialectic of the reconciliation of disagreements about states of affairs is played out across increasingly less local states of affairs, then eventually we will arrive at a conception of the world with which all merely local perspectives on the world can be reconciled. Or so, at least, the hope goes.

But not all knowledge is like this: some knowledge is itself constituted by our perspective. Williams thinks that ethical knowledge is of this variety: some things are shameful, but they are only shameful because we (locally) think of them as such; abstract moral theory, which attempts to make use of universal principles, cannot by itself arrive at a morally ‘thick’ concept like shame, or account for the role it plays in our ethical life. But nonetheless it is still appropriate to talk about knowing what shame is, and what is shameful – there is

⁷² Weinsheimer has gathered together the relevant material to show that Gadamer, at least some of the time, is a pretty straightforward realist about natural science: see *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, pp. 15-36. This is a position more or less maintained by Charles Taylor in his recent attempt to set out something like an ontology of language in *The Language Animal* (Harvard, 2016); see in particular his contrast between ‘the human world’ and ‘the world out there’, p. 37.

⁷³ See *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harvester, 1978), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard, 1985), and ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’, collected in his *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A. W. Moore (Princeton, 2006).

something that counts as, in Williams's phrase, 'getting it right'. From here, we can quite easily broaden the domain of this kind of knowledge to the whole field of the humanities and human sciences, insofar as they are bound up in the project of 'making sense of humanity' (to borrow another Williamsism), and making sense of humanity involves, among other things, employing evaluative notions and mental concepts (such as 'intention').

So we might be tempted to say that there is a nice clean demarcation: on the right hand side, we have the sciences and their pursuit of the absolute conception of the world; and on the left, we have the humanities and their attempt to make sense of humanity. Every discipline could have its place; we need only move in an orderly fashion to the correct side; and the domain of hermeneutics would clearly be over on the left. There is something in this clean demarcation, but while it is illuminating it does not, unfortunately, remain very clean.

Nonetheless, before we move onto its problems, it does neatly show us why hermeneutical concerns cannot be *straightforwardly* applied to those disciplines over on the scientific side in the same way as they can be to humanistic disciplines. Insofar as they are understood as enquiries into what is the case anyway, and what would be the case whether or not we bothered to enquire, then it is a matter of revising our concepts to be more adequate to reality – the role of language and interpretation in constituting the objects of inquiry is diminished (but not entirely lacking).⁷⁴ In this domain, hermeneutical claims about the 'historicity of knowledge' and so on risk winding up as platitudes, as happens when Wachterhauser points out (in his book on Gadamer and Plato) that our understanding of AIDS unfolds over time.⁷⁵ We hardly needed Gadamer's insight to work this out.

The trouble for Wachterhauser's example is that, if one is to apply hermeneutical insights to the sciences, one will have to go deeper than just looking at some particular inquiry – one instead has to show the way the field of objects has been disclosed in advance, such that in AIDS research we are looking

⁷⁴ This is so because any scientific enquiry has to treat its objects *as* something; and, as we have seen, to take something *as* something is to interpret it.

⁷⁵ Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being* (Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 52.

for microscopic entities and not miasma.⁷⁶ This is the first trouble with Williams's distinction. While the project of the natural sciences is to work out how nature is 'in itself', independently of our experience of it (insofar as that is possible), the sciences always set out from the basis of an already-given understanding of the world, and for an already-given purpose. When Gadamer claims that 'Each science, as a science, has in advance projected a field of objects such that to know them is to govern them' (TM 449), there seem to be two ideas lurking in there. The first is that, before a science can get off the ground, it has to 'project a field of objects'. Just as it is impossible to do something so simple as to count the number of objects in a room without already having determined (even if implicitly) what is to count as an object (is a cup one object, or is the handle separate; or do we have, to adapt Quine's phrase, an ontology of cup-parts?), so a science must determine what counts as an object for it, and how these objects are to be 'seen'.⁷⁷ This does not entail that there is nothing at all 'there' prior to this projection; it is merely to take Nietzsche's point that the world does not pre-determine how it is to be taken: it can be carved up (or 'interpreted') in a variety of ways.⁷⁸ Second, it projects this field of objects 'so that to know them is to govern them': this is a way of engaging with the world that prioritises making its objects manipulable, which further constrains the ways in which these objects are to be projected.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ This is the point of Thomas Kuhn's insistence on revolutions and paradigm shifts in the history of science: see *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁷⁷ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; and see also Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §3, esp. p. 30: 'Basic concepts determine the way in which we get an understanding beforehand of the area of subject-matter underlying all the objects a science takes as its theme, and all positive investigation is guided by this understanding.'

⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §22, in *Beyond Good and Evil / On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Stanford, 2014).

⁷⁹ Williams could easily reply here that it is all well and good that historically the field of scientific objects has been projected in a variety of ways – the point he would want to insist on is that the ultimate goal of the sciences is to progressively overcome these historically variable, inadequate conceptions of the world until we finally arrive at a stable, final conception. At this stage, while we would still need to interpret the objects of scientific inquiry *as* something, the 'as' would perfectly correspond to what the entity was independently of interpretation. The basic distinction between his position and the (strongly) hermeneutical position seems to lie in whether we are to believe that the world is sufficiently determinate to force upon us one final conception, that there is something the 'as' could perfectly correspond to. Kuhn, for example, closes *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by claiming that we should give up on the idea of a final conception *towards* which we are moving, and instead to think of science as always evolving *from*.

The second trouble with Williams's distinction is that it leaves something important out: the relationship between humans as entities that have experiences, and the entities they have experiences of. One of the central features of our experience of the world is that we find it (more or less) intelligible – and we might, legitimately, ask what this intelligibility consists in.⁸⁰ Further, our relation to the world is not limited to enquiring into its processes and attempting to arrive at an absolute conception; the world is also the horizon within which (and along with which) I appear, and within which things appear. Husserl's investigations into the ways in which things are given do not seem to fit either into a project of working out the absolute conception of the world (the world does not appear if there is nobody to whom it could do so), nor is it bound up with local (cultural and historical) perspectives (it is not only in Germany in the early 20th century that objects appear such that one side faces us and the other is hidden).⁸¹

From the hermeneutical perspective, then, it is not that the sciences investigate 'ultimate' reality, and human experience is the domain of 'mere' appearances; rather, the human world, the life world, *is* the world, from which the sciences set out to investigate, in a certain mode, certain aspects. The sciences flatten the world, reduce it, purge it of its interest, try to get behind the things in the lifeworld, and in doing so prove strikingly productive in working out its basic machinery; but to hold that the reality it uncovers is ultimate while the lifeworld is an illusion is to enter into a topsy-turvy world.⁸²

But the lifeworld is, nonetheless, grounded in this lifeless, purged world uncovered by the sciences.⁸³ As Heidegger puts it: 'Entities *are*, quite independently of the experience by which they are disclosed, the acquaintance by which they are discovered, and the grasping in which their nature is

⁸⁰ On this point see Grondin's essay, 'Metaphysical or Nihilistic ...', p. 199.

⁸¹ Cf. TM 249-50, where Gadamer makes a similar critique of Dilthey's distinction between the human and natural sciences.

⁸² Weinsheimer suggests that, by the mid-80s, philosophers of science had more or less given up on the idea that scientific models were *true*: 'Indeed, almost the sole recent philosopher of science who feels no embarrassment about truth is Michael Polyani.' (*Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 18) I would suggest in turn that, 30 years later, here in Australia, scientific truth is in a position of dominance, and we live in this kind of topsy-turvy world, in which one cannot mention intentional activity or self-control without someone immediately explaining it in terms of the pre-frontal cortex.

⁸³ 'No one doubts that the world can exist without man and perhaps will do so.' (TM 444)

ascertained. But Being 'is' only in the understanding of those entities to whose Being something like an understanding of Being belongs.⁸⁴ This is to say: entities exist in some bare sense of the term, but they only acquire being through becoming manifest and acquiring meaning and significance.⁸⁵ That entities are thus grounded is one of the bases on which things in the world can resist our conception of them. There are certain things that must always remain true in the human world, that cultural and historical change simply cannot eliminate: physical objects move and interact in a regular fashion; fire warms, melts, cooks and burns; and humans require a certain minimum of food, water and shelter, and when these are not met the result is misery.⁸⁶

But, just as from the human perspective the world understood through the sciences is a reduction, from that perspective the human world is an elaboration. The material base of things is elaborated through being brought into language: certain potentialities are suppressed, others are encouraged. Our sexual identities, for example, are partly constituted by the ideas in light of which we make sense of ourselves.⁸⁷ Our ethical life is similarly constituted.⁸⁸ Chairs, tables, and so on – human material objects – become what they are through coming into a language, a language bound up with a certain kind of tradition and practical life.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 228. This passage is essential for understanding Gadamer's dictum 'Being that can be understood is language'.

⁸⁵ As Kathleen Wright glosses Gadamer's point, language 'bestows being in and through the word'. See her 'Gadamer: The Speculative Structure of Language', in Wachterhauser (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, p. 212.

⁸⁶ Grounding things in this way protects us against the cruder excesses of culturalism – and, perhaps, from ideology as well. This seems to be the reason why Marx and Engels insist they are starting from 'material premises' in *The German Ideology*: the human body that labours in order to reproduce itself. To start from abstract premises, they suggest, is to tempt ideological confusion.

⁸⁷ For a discussion of this, see the essays in the first part of David Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (Routledge, 1990).

⁸⁸ See Charles Taylor, e.g. 'Self-interpreting animals', collected in his *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge, 1985); and see also his more recent discussion in *The Language Animal* (Harvard, 2016), Ch. 6.

⁸⁹ Helmut Kuhn makes a similar point when he observes that our responses, our practical interests, and so on, 'contribute to [the world's] constitution, draw it into the ambit of our life, and mark it as an element of the human situation. The surface of the globe, then, becomes our "landscape", the waste of salt water an ocean which we sail; the plant a vegetable or a weed, etc.' ('The Phenomenological Concept of "Horizon"', p. 121) Cf. the whole of the third part of his essay, from which this quote was taken, which also discusses this issue of the relation between 'ontology (theory of the intended object in general, *Gegenstandslehre*)' (which corresponds roughly to Williams's 'absolute conception') and 'existential analysis (theory of the human situation, philosophical anthropology)' (i.e. the world with us in it).

Gadamer's discussions of translation and of interpretation can illuminate this issue. In interpretation, Gadamer says, it is not the case that a second thing is created that is distinct from the thing interpreted; rather, it is *through* interpretation that the thing is able to appear (TM 400).⁹⁰ The interpretation relates to the work of art as accident to substance; in allowing the work to present itself, the interpretation emphasises some elements (TM 401). In other words, the rich and indeterminate possibility of the artwork must be made determinate in order to appear; in being made determinate, the artwork both becomes *more* than it is otherwise (uninterpreted, it is mere abstract possibility) and *less* (this possibility being realised, others are excluded). 'All interpretation is highlighting,' Gadamer says (TM 401). Similarly, 'every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original' (TM 388). It is perhaps significant that Walter Benjamin sees understanding things as a matter of translating the divine language of God into a human language:⁹¹ like a text in translation, like a work of art in interpretation, the world becomes both more and less than itself in being brought into language.⁹² To have a world is to have *these* possibilities for acting, feeling, thinking, and so on – and to *not* have *those* possibilities for acting, etc., and thus to not have *all* possibilities. This is not to suggest that one cannot act or feel without language (my dog manages to do both), but rather to say that feeling and acting – which are basic possibilities rooted in our creaturely being – are transformed in various ways by our being a part of a particular world.⁹³

And this, then, is the second way in which things can resist our conceptualising activity, why there is something that counts as 'getting it right': what brings things into language is not me but my community or my tradition; this is what constitutes the clearing or opening that, in Heidegger's words, affects

⁹⁰ Cf. Grondin, 'Play, Festival, and Ritual in Gadamer: On the theme of the immemorial in his later works', p. 53; and István Fehér, 'On the Hermeneutic Understanding of Language: Word, conversation and subject matter', pp. 63-4; both are collected in Lawrence K. Schmidt (ed.), *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*.

⁹¹ 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man'.

⁹² The dialectic between more and less here is similar to Hegel's discussion of the will, which has to give up on indeterminate infinity in order to actually *become* something. In doing so it becomes both more (actual rather than possible) and less (finite rather than infinite).

⁹³ Cf. Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, esp. Ch. 6.

the original un-concealment of things, what he calls *aletheia*.⁹⁴ The hermeneutical way of seeing the world is to grasp things in their historical contingency: things really are what they appear to us as, but there is no necessity to the world horizon being the way it is such that they appear this way. This is why Heidegger speaks of *aletheia* as a revealing that is *at the same time* concealing: things *could* appear to us otherwise than they do: some possibilities are disclosed while others are hidden.

(c) Reality as Language

Heidegger's essay on Stefan George's poem 'Words' (both the name of the essay and the name of the poem) can help us to further explore what an ontology of language consists in.⁹⁵ George's poem runs as follows:

Wonder or dream from distant land
I carried to my country's strand

And waited till the twilit norn
Had found the name within her bourn–

Then I could grasp it close and strong
It blooms and shines now the front along...

Once I returned from happy sail,
I had a prize so rich and frail,

She sought for long and tidings told:
"No like of this these depths enfold."

And straight it vanished from my hand,

⁹⁴ See, in particular, the last few pages of Heidegger's essay 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking', collected in his *Basic Writings*.

⁹⁵ 'Words', trans. J. Stambaugh, collected in Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. Hertz and J. Stambaugh (Harper & Row, 1971).

The treasure never graced my land...

So I renounced and sadly see:

Where word breaks off no thing may be.⁹⁶

This poem tells a story of the poet's relation to language and his efforts to render things in words. In the first three stanzas, we are offered an image of poetry successfully practised: the poet manages to bring to his poem (his 'country's strand') 'wonder or dream from distant land' – the stuff of the poem. But the next group of stanzas, four through six, present something different: the failure of this practise. The poet, returning with a great treasure, finds that there are no words for it: "No like of this these depths enfold." The treasure promptly vanishes from his hand – it cannot be brought into the poem, cannot be brought into language. And so the poet resigns himself to it: 'Where word breaks off no thing may be.'⁹⁷

What Heidegger notes is that the poem points us towards just how tightly bound up words are with things. The word, he says, is what makes the thing a thing; it 'bethings' it (p. 151). 'Bethinging', he says, does not mean that the word is the 'ground' of the thing, or the 'sufficient reason'; rather, it 'allows the thing to presence as thing'.⁹⁸ We should recall here Gadamer's rejection of language as

⁹⁶ This is the translation (by P. Hertz) given in the essay, p. 140.

⁹⁷ An example of the reverse of this can be found in the rather less lofty literature of Flann O'Brien. In *The Third Policeman*, when the narrator is taken to 'eternity', he is shown a cabinet that can seemingly produce anything. One of the things the demonstrating policeman produces for him is a stream of strange non-objects: 'But what can I say about them? In colour they were not white or black and certainly bore no intermediate colour; they were far from dark and anything but bright. But strange to say it was not their unprecedented hue that took most of my attention. They had another quality that made me watch wild-eyed, dry-throated and with no breathing. I can make no attempt to describe this quality. It took me hours of thought long afterwards to realise why these articles were astonishing. *They lacked an essential property of all known objects*. I cannot call it shape or configuration since shapelessness is not what I refer to. I can only say that these objects, not one of which resembled the other, were of no known dimensions. They were not square or rectangular or circular or simply irregularly shaped nor could it be said that their endless variety was due to dimensional dissimilarities. Simply their appearance, if even that word is not inadmissible, was not understood by the eye and was in any event indescribable. That is enough to say.' (*The Third Policeman* [Harper Perennial, 2007], Ch. 8, pp. 139-140; emphasis in original.) The strange non-objects he is presented with resist all attempts to describe them – the narrator has to resort to negatives. No word can get any traction with them.

⁹⁸ When Weinsheimer discusses the last line of this poem, his gloss suggests that he is downplaying this *ontological* dimension in favour of emphasizing the connection between language and understanding: 'Where the word breaks off no thing can be. There is no understanding of things apart from language, and no understanding of language apart from things. They belong together.' This seems to imply that there can be things without language, just

the language of being – such an account would make language the *reason* for things. But the relation is much more contingent than this, as is evidenced by Heidegger's discussion of this point with reference to *poetry*. A poem is not world history – there is no inexorable logic by which it unfolds, nor anything even vaguely necessary about it. But when a poem succeeds there is an inner logic to it, a coherence that then leads us to wonder how it could have been any different. And so it is when the word allows the thing to presence as thing: once it appears as a thing, it seems so natural and obvious that we forget it is the work of a word, that without the word it could not appear as a thing. This leads us to the converse reflection: without the thing there could be no word.

When discussing the 'treasure' that the poet is unable to bring into language, Heidegger supposes that it must be something very grand indeed (p. 147). He pursues this thought, and finally suggests that the treasure that the poet cannot bring into language is the essence of language itself (p. 154). The poem is thus about the poet's relation to the essence of language; an expression of the dependence of the poet on something that cannot itself be expressed – and Heidegger notes the significance that the poet *renounces* (and thus expresses) this inability to express this mystery, rather than merely *rejecting* it and lapsing into silence (p. 147). I do not want to reject this reading, but would like to observe that if we take the poem to be about the failure to 'find the right word' (in Gadamer's expression) in general rather than just about the poet's meditation on the un-sayable heart of the sayable, we open up a broader horizon. 'Where word breaks off no thing may be' points us towards the indeterminacy of what has not been brought into language, how slippery and hard to grasp it is; and, inversely, how relatively stable and natural those things seem that have been brought to order by language.

There is another feature of the poem that is worth calling attention to, since it is important for Heidegger's reading. This is that the poet waits upon the Norn (a being from Norse mythology) to find the name for his treasure – it is she who speaks the line "No like of this these depths enfold". What this emphasises is the

no understanding of them. The point I am making is that, for an ontology of language, ontology, language and understanding all belong together. See Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 232.

passivity of the poet, who is listening for the language of things.⁹⁹ In this, Heidegger differs from Gadamer, who takes language to be neither *simply* the language of things, nor *simply* a human projection. In an essay from the same year in which *Truth and Method* was published (1960), Gadamer explored precisely this issue.¹⁰⁰ What is striking in the essay is the way Gadamer opposes both modern-technological consciousness, which sees in the world so much unresisting matter to be brought under human control and bestowed with human meanings, and modern attempts to insist on the independent existence of things, such that they provide resistance to our attempts to appropriate them. This latter camp insists on 'the nature of things', and point out that the independent existence of things means there is a limit to our powers to appropriate them. What both camps share, he claims, is 'the assumption that human subjectivity is will, an assumption that retains its unquestioned validity even where we posit being-in-itself as a limit to the determination of things by man's will' (PH 74). This means that they are caught in a one-sided understanding of the relation of man to things, whether they think that man can bend things to his will, or must bend his will to things.

This is an occasion when Gadamer appeals to the superiority of ancient metaphysics over modern subjectivism (PH 74, 78), the superiority of which lies in its emphasis on the 'pre-existent correspondence' of subject and object, which allows it to transcend the opposition between subjectivity/will and objectivity/being-in-itself. While the theological grounding for this view has fallen away, Gadamer thinks the basic insight is right (PH 75). Language is the 'finite possibility of doing justice to this correspondence' (PH 75); the correspondence of the human mind to things is not a victory of one over the other, but rather 'the correspondence that finds its concretion in the linguistic experience of the world is as such what is absolutely prior' (PH 78). Language is, in some sense, prior to our experience of the world, in that it has (usually) already (more or less) achieved its task of carving the world up – what we experience is already linguistically mediated. For this reason, Gadamer favours

⁹⁹ See Gadamer's essay 'Heidegger's Later Philosophy' (collected in PH) for the importance of this for Heidegger.

¹⁰⁰ 'The Nature of Things and the Language of Things', collected in PH.

the expression 'the language of things' over 'the nature of things', as reflecting the primordial correspondence.

Gadamer elaborates what he means by this with a terse and ambiguous discussion of the concept of 'rhythm' (PH 79). I will quote it at length, and then proceed to unpack it.

[1] The succession that is rhythmatised by the rhythm does not necessarily represent the rhythm of the phenomena themselves. Rather, rhythm can be imputed by our hearing even to a regular succession, so that it appears as rhythmatically organised. Or better, wherever a regular succession is to be perceived by the mind, such a rhythmatising not only can but in the end *must* take place. But what do we mean here when we say "it must"? Something opposed to the nature of things? Obviously not. But then what does "the rhythm of the phenomena themselves" mean? Are the phenomena not first precisely what they are in that they are thus apprehended as rhythmic or rhythmatised? Thus the correspondence that holds between them is more original than the acoustic succession on the one hand and the rhythmatising apprehension on the other. (PH 79)

He goes on to elaborate this with reference to 'poetic minds' like that of Hölderlin:

[2] When they differentiate the original poetic experience from the pre-given character of language as well as from the pre-given character of the world (i.e., the order of things) and describe the poetic conception as the harmony of the world and soul in the linguistic concretisation that becomes poetry, it is a rhythmic experience they are describing. The structure of the poem, which thus becomes language, guarantees the process of soul and world addressing each other as something finite. It is here that the being of language shows its central position. (PH 79)

And then concludes by rejecting the idea that language is a human projection onto the world.

[3] The subjective starting point, which has become natural to modern thought, leads us wholly into error. Language is not to be conceived as a preliminary projection of the world by subjectivity, either as the subjectivity of individual consciousness or as that of the spirit of a people. These are all mythologies, just as the concept of genius is. The concept of genius plays so dominant a role in aesthetic theory because it understands the origination of the form as an unconscious production and thus teaches us to interpret it in analogy with conscious production. But the work of art is as little to be understood in terms of the planned execution of a sketch – even an infallibly unconscious one – as the course of history may be conceived for our finite consciousness as the execution of a plan. Rather, he as well as there, luck and success tempt us into *oracula ex eventu* that in fact hide the event – the word or deed – by which they are expressed. (PH 79)

The first passage contains a few crucial ambiguities. What is he referring to when he mentions a ‘regular succession’ in the second sentence? Something human, like tapping on a table or knocking on a door, which humans tend to spontaneously turn into rhythmic exercises? Could it be any regular succession, like the drip of water? Must it be a regular succession of *sound*, or could it include the phases of the moon and the cycle of the seasons? It cannot be something already human, since that would not succeed in making his point – it would only show that humans are rhythmic, not that rhythm is a paradigm case of correspondence. Limiting it to only successions of sounds would make some sense, in that he chooses rhythm as an example in part because it is a ‘structural aspect of everything linguistic’ (PH 79), but it would limit the correspondence of word and thing only to audible things. So it must be any regular succession to be found in things. Then he says that such regular successions in things *must* be grasped by humans as rhythms – and the series of rhetorical questions that follow seem to point to the conclusion that what is going on in the perception of

rhythm in the world is not well understood as the perception of rhythm in the things themselves, since one can always suppose, from an abstracted perspective, that the successions in the things themselves are “meaningless” (and thus resist our attempts at imposing meaning); and nor is it well understood as the imposition of meanings on “neutral” things in themselves, since *the hearing of rhythm is not arbitrary* – one cannot hear any rhythm one likes in the succession of things.¹⁰¹ Rather, the rhythm happens *in between* the thing and the person: the apparent immediacy of the experience of hearing a rhythm in the dripping of a pipe is neither the domination of the thing over the person nor the person over the thing, but *a disguised mediation between person and thing* – it is only from the starting point of this mediation that one can abstract oneself to the point of wondering which (the person or the thing) is dominating the other.¹⁰² Elsewhere, Gadamer says of images that ‘we both elicit the image from things and imaginatively project the image into things in one and the same process’ (RB 17). Humans are linguistic beings, and thus their experience of the world is one that is *always already* mediated by language. There is a sense in which it is something humans ‘do’, in that there is no intelligible world without a subject to experience it; and the given mediation of the world is, on Gadamer’s account, a result of the prejudice-structure of that subject’s understanding. But, in another sense, this mediation cannot be described as something humans do, since it is not an activity we consciously (or even unconsciously, as [3] suggests) undertake. Rather, the world is already intelligible before we even begin to think or act. Thus in [3] Gadamer rejects the idealist conception of experience and language as the activity of the subject, whether that subject is understood as an individual or as a community; to understand experience or language in this way is to suppose, as it were that one could hear any rhythm one liked.

We can then see this mediation at work in [2]. The poet delves beneath the ‘pre-given’ mediation that has been concretised in their linguistic community in order to experience afresh – and the poem is the result. (As we will see later, this delving beneath pre-given mediations is very important for Gadamer.) In a

¹⁰¹ In arriving at this reading, I had in mind Raymond Geuss’s discussion of Adorno’s and Benjamin’s concept of ‘constellations’, *A World Without Why* (Princeton, 2014), pp. 181-2.

¹⁰² See also Gadamer’s discussion of rhythm in ‘The Relevance of the Beautiful’, RB 44-5.

similar manner, Anne Carson defines the 'poetic act' as 'reaching right to the edge of ordinary babble, to the place where metaphor waits and naming occurs'.¹⁰³ This is a 'rhythmic experience', it seems to me, because in thus diving down the poet affects a fresh experience of the things, finding new words, experiencing a new mediation between soul and thing just as listening to the rhythm of the rain affects a direct mediation. The poet seeks the rhythm of the thing itself.

On the final page of the essay, Gadamer aligns himself with Heidegger and the 'language of things', as opposed to the advocates of 'the nature of things'. It strikes me that this is too hasty on his part, since his argument has also undermined the too-passive demand that we simply listen to the language of things. The helpful thing about his concept of prejudice is that it allows us to see the mediation in the apparent immediacy of experience; and the trouble with the later Heidegger is his insistence on the *self*-presentation of things, such that one gets the impression that humans are passively beholden to the way Being presents itself, and that conceptual activity on their part only serves to obscure the self-disclosure of being.¹⁰⁴ In the concept of rhythm, Gadamer has found a way of showing that human experience is neither activity nor passivity but harmonious mediation.

We can now turn to Gadamer's most essential discussions of language: the discussion of Plato's *Cratylus* in *Truth and Method* (TM III.5 2[a]); and the discussion of language-as-incarnation (TM III.5 2[b]). Our interest will be to show how the account of the ontology of language I have developed in the previous sections illuminates and is illuminated by these chapters.

Let us begin with the first of these chapters, 'Language and *logos*'. The tension Gadamer finds at the root of Greek thought about language is that between 'belief in the word and doubt about it': does the word belong to the thing, or is it a mere sign? (TM 406) Thus the *Cratylus* discusses two competing theories: the 'similarity' theory that there is a kind of natural affinity between word and thing, and a 'conventionalist' theory that holds that there is nothing more to language

¹⁰³ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 68.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy', in his *Critical Models: Interpretations and Catchwords*, pp. 9-12.

than (ultimately arbitrary) custom and usage. Plato's presentation of these positions, Gadamer notes, seems to aim at a third account of truth and language: that truth cannot be attained in language, and instead the mind must be opened to its objects (through dialectic), since 'the adequacy of the word can be judged only from the knowledge of the thing it refers to' (TM 408).

But there is something missing from this account, Gadamer thinks. Both the conventionalist and similarity theories start 'too late', in that they take for granted that we know things independently and *then* reach for language as a tool to express our thoughts. Similarly, Plato's account wants to look around the corner, to peek at the things themselves so as to judge the adequacy of names. Language remains a mere tool, with 'no real cognitive significance' (TM 410). The upshot is that 'if the sphere of the *logos* represents the sphere of the noetic in the variety of its associations, then the *word*, just like the number, becomes mere *sign* of a being that is well defined and hence pre-known' (TM 413). Thus this conception of language 'turns the question around', since it begins 'from the word as means' and asks 'how it communicates to the person who uses it', rather than beginning from the thing and 'inquiring into the being of the word as a means of conveying it'.

Ever since the *Cratylus*, Gadamer thinks, the convention theory of language has won out over the similarity theory – and this is a real problem. This is not to say that Gadamer wants to restore a similarity theory of language; on the contrary, he thinks the problem is that the basic way of framing the question is misleading. The result has been what Gadamer calls the 'forgetfulness of language':¹⁰⁵ the treatment of ordinary language as a messy, inadequate affair,

¹⁰⁵ David Vessey has some apt observations about this claim: 'Gadamer holds that were it not for Augustine's account of the *Verbum interius* we would have descended into an inescapable forgetfulness of language. It's hard to know what would count as evidence for this claim. That Augustine's view is distinctively non-Greek, in the sense that it is impossible to express it in the range of traditional categories of Greek metaphysics, does not mean that without it later thinkers could not have thought in non-Greek ways. Moreover Gadamer is seeking a purely secular understanding of the ontological connection between words and things, so the theological context of the Trinity would not seem to be historically essential for avoiding a merely semiotic interpretation of language. I think a more plausible way of putting Gadamer's conclusion should be that Augustine, and especially Aquinas, developed aspects of their philosophies of language and mind that were indebted to their Christologies and that help us today to explain the proper ontological relation between words and things. The more extreme, quasi-Heideggarian claim about the forgetfulness of language is best ignored.' (See Vessey's review of Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24223-the-inner-word-in-gadamer-s-hermeneutics/>)

and the pursuit of a more perfect system of signs in which everything could have its name, clearly and unequivocally. Gadamer's comment on this is important, and worth quoting at length:

In my view this path leads us away from the nature of language. Language and thinking are so bound together that it is an abstraction to conceive of the system of truths as a pre-given system of possibilities of being for which the signifying subject selects corresponding signs. A word is not a sign that one selects, nor is it a sign that one makes or gives to another; it is not an existent thing that one picks up and gives an ideality of meaning in order to make another being visible through it. This is mistaken on both counts. Rather, the ideality of the meaning lies in the word itself. It is meaningful already. But this does not imply, on the other hand, that the word precedes all experience and simply advenes to an experience in an external way, by subjecting itself to it. Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under the universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it. We seek the right word – i.e., the word that really belongs to the thing – so that in it the thing comes into language. Even if we keep in mind that this does not imply any simple copying, the word still belongs to the thing insofar as a word is not a sign coordinated to the thing *ex post facto*. (TM 417)

Experience is thus linguistic experience, because the world is linguistically structured. We note that in this passage Gadamer is concerned with experience as that which is expressible and spoken about; and in this he seems closer to Walter Benjamin's concept of experience as what can be communicated to others¹⁰⁶ than we might expect if we are looking for an account of experience that corresponds to the phrase 'being that can be understood is language'. But a

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience* (California, 2005), Ch. 8; and Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 1:31.

closer look shows that this is not so, for what Gadamer is pointing to is that *expressible* experience arises out of experience that is *already linguistic*; what he is opposing is the idea that experience occurs independently of language and is then simply expressed by means of linguistic expressions that already lie ready to hand.

This gets further spelled out in the next chapter, 'Language and *verbum*'. In this chapter, Gadamer makes a famous excursion into Christian theology: 'There is [...] an idea that is not Greek which does more justice to the being of language, and so prevented the forgetfulness of language in Western thought from being complete. This is the Christian idea of *incarnation*.' (TM 418) The significance of incarnation is that it is *not* embodiment: where embodiment presupposes a distinction between body and soul, with the latter imprisoned in the former, incarnation is not the divine soul entering a human body but rather the divine *showing itself* in human form.

Incarnation was closely connected by the Christian theologians with 'the problem of the word': the connection between the 'inner word' (of my thinking and understanding) and the 'outer word' (which I speak). Speaking, like the incarnation, is an act of becoming that 'is not the kind of becoming in which something turns into something else'; nor is it 'separating one thing from the other', nor 'lessening the inner word into its emergence into exteriority', nor 'becoming something different, so that the inner word is used up' (TM 419; Gadamer is paraphrasing from Augustine). Thought, this is to say, does not become other than itself in being expressed in language: it is already language. The 'miracle of language' is 'that that which emerges and externalises itself in utterance is always already a word' (ibid.). 'The inner mental word is just as consubstantial with thought as is God the Son with God the Father' (TM 420).

Although it occurs temporally, thinking is not a temporal series of moments; it is, rather, a process – and Gadamer follows Aquinas in taking the Neoplatonic concept of emanation to explicate it. 'In the process of emanation, that from which something flows, the One, is not deprived or depleted'; the image is that of a fountain (TM 422). 'The same is true of the birth of the Son from the Father, who does not use up anything of himself but takes something to himself. And this is likewise true of the mental emergence that takes place in the process of

thought, speaking to oneself. This kind of production is at the same time a total remaining within oneself.' (TM 422-3)

The human word is potential before it is actual: in this it differs from the divine word. A thought occurs to us, but it is not yet finished – the 'real movement of thought' consists in thinking the thought through to its conclusion. This process is the bringing of the thought into language, of forming the perfect word to express it – at which point the thing is present in it. 'Thomas found a brilliant metaphor for this: the word is like a mirror in which the thing is seen.' (TM 424) However, being finite creatures, we can never quite find the perfect word to express our thought or ourselves. This is not a defect of the word, however, but rather a feature of our minds: 'the imperfection of the human mind consists in its never being completely present to itself but in being dispersed into thinking this or that'.¹⁰⁷ For this reason, the human word is not one word but many words. The mind is also incapable of completely grasping the things it thinks about, and thus 'constantly proceeds to new conceptions and is fundamentally incapable of being wholly realised in any' (TM 424-5). The infinity of the mind consists in this constant surpassing of itself.

As he summarises the chapter, Gadamer points to the link between the inner word and the ontology of language. 'The word [that forms in the mind through thought] is not expressing the mind but the thing intended,' he tells us (TM 425); in other words, it is only because things already *signify* that they can be thought.¹⁰⁸ Thus I would like to claim that Gadamer has a thoroughly materialist or corporeal conception of language. I do not mean this in the sense that at heart he is a materialist in the sense that is a synonym for 'physicalist'; on the contrary, while physicalism claims that the human world is more or less an illusion, and the real world is the world of whatever it is physics describes, for Gadamer (staying true to his phenomenological roots) it is the human world that is real and the world of physics that is a reduction (in the sense of my discussion above:

¹⁰⁷ One might compare the character of Mr Kelly from Beckett's *Murphy*: 'His attention could not be mobilised like that at a moment's notice. His attention was dispersed. Part was with its caecum, which was wagging its tail again; part with his extremities, which were dragging anchor; part with his boyhood; and so on. All this would have to be called in.' Samuel Beckett, *The Works of Samuel Beckett*, 4 vols., ed. Paul Auster (Grove, 2006), 1:14.

¹⁰⁸ 'Being makes itself accessible by presenting itself in beings that can be understood, and they are its self-presentations, its language.' Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 255.

the physical world is a *reduction* of – something *less than* – the human world). The material world is a part of the phenomenal world, whereas the physical world is a Platonic projection of a beyond; and while the physical world is purged of signification, the material world is shot through with it.¹⁰⁹

Gadamer's corporeality of language goes two ways. In the chapters we have just discussed, he shows how language is something corporeal – it makes things present to us (or, as he puts it, the thing is present in the word).¹¹⁰ There is an obvious objection that may be made to this, one expressed neatly by Petrarch in one of his laments on the limits of language: 'From reading "fire" you are not burned.'¹¹¹ This is to say: language does not affect one as a material object does. Petrarch laments frequently that his poems are unable to capture the beauty of his subject, Laura. We have all had this experience: the range of shades of the colour green we observe on a tree (which we can only call 'green', 'light green', 'dark green', 'pale green', etc. – all utterly inadequate); or the beauty of a sunset behind a mountain that eludes words. This objection highlights that what Gadamer means is not that language performs some kind of magical conjuring trick, making things *physically* present to us by naming them – as though when I call something 'green' or 'pale green' you can see precisely the right colour, or that when I describe a sunset as 'beautiful' you immediately know precisely how it looked. Rather, language makes things present to us in much the same way that a portrait makes the subject present (RB 35). It directs our attention to the thing expressed, not necessarily to the language used,¹¹² and renders that thing in a certain way, painting it in a certain way ('godlike Achilles', 'wily Odysseus', 'that bastard'). The word does not express the mind – it expresses the thing intended (TM 425).

We have also seen the way in which language is corporeal in the second sense: things are always already in some sense linguistic. Language is part of the constitution of things. Things signify – or, as he puts it, they speak to us. By

¹⁰⁹ BT §15-18.

¹¹⁰ For brief discussion, see P. Christopher Smith (2000), 'Between the Audible Word and the Envisionable Concept: Re-reading Plato's *Theaetetus* after Gadamer', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 33, p. 341.

¹¹¹ Petrarch, *Sonnets and Shorter Poems*, trans. David R. Slavitt (Harvard, 2012), p. 280.

¹¹² Poetic language differs from ordinary speech in this way, by calling attention to itself as language. For the importance of this, see the discussion at the end of Ch. 3.

speaking to us, they are within language, but not exhausted by it. No matter how many poems Petrarch writes, and no matter how good they are, the real Laura (or even, after her death, Petrarch's memory of her) exceeds their grasp. And yet her name serves to gather together those disparate moments of her life (and death); and the virtues of hers that Petrarch responded to so deeply are only there to be aimed at through the medium of language.¹¹³ We might think of this aspect of language as its unifying or gathering force; it picks out the ways in which things are similar to each other, and in this way gathers them. As Montaigne has said, everything is at once in some ways similar and in some ways different from everything else: 'All things hold together by some similarity; every example is lame, and the comparison that is drawn from experience is always faulty and imperfect; however, we fasten together our comparisons by some corner.'¹¹⁴ What is distinctive about Gadamer's ontology of language, as we have seen, is that it insists that such comparisons are not merely external to the things, which are what they are in themselves anyway; it insists that the words by which we gather things become part of those things, and thus constitute them. That the fit is not perfect, that the particular thing is not exhausted by the language that captures it, is part of the way in which things speak to us, and is the reason why Gadamer insists on the final inadequacy of all words, and why 'finding the right word' is a perpetual task.

Similarly, the encounter with something new can expand the range of a word in a way that would not previously have suggested itself. In Chapter 5 of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*,¹¹⁵ Alice eats a piece of mushroom that causes her neck to stretch to absurd length, far above the trees. She finds she is able to coil and move her neck like a snake, and as her head comes down through the trees to find her body, she is accosted by a pigeon, who accuses her of being a serpent and wanting to eat its eggs. She insists that she's a little girl, although she admits that she has eaten eggs in the past: 'But little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.' The pigeon replies: 'I don't believe it; but if they do, why then they're a kind of serpent, that's all I can say.' There is, in other words, in this

¹¹³ See Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, Ch. 6.

¹¹⁴ Montaigne, 'Of Experience', pp. 997-8.

¹¹⁵ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* (Vintage, 2007). The quotes that follow are from p. 64.

context and for this pigeon, a highly relevant similarity between serpents and little girls, namely that both eat eggs, which allows him to make a metaphorical extension of 'serpent'. Were this similarity to remain of overwhelming significance, and not just for this pigeon but for pigeons at large, one can easily imagine pigeons eliding the difference between 'little girls' and 'serpents' entirely, for they are hardly going to maintain a distinction between such things as are, for all practical purposes, the same. In this way what is at first a metaphorical extension of a term may become part of its literal meaning; and the way language gathers things together may shift its boundaries.¹¹⁶ In the world of a pigeon, the difference between a little girl and a serpent is rather more abstract than it is for us.

We began the discussion of Gadamer's ontology of language by setting up a contrast with Beckett's *Molloy*, to which contrast we can now return in order to motivate a criticism of Gadamer's treatment of the ontology of language. *Molloy* points us towards a dimension of experience that Gadamer's insistence on linguisticity cannot comfortably accommodate. It is striking that when Molloy insists that his past self did not experience in an orderly linguistic way but rather in a way that was vague and not fully conscious *this makes sense to us*. Gadamer's concept of experience takes as its paradigm the person who is fully awake and self-present, whose experiences make sense to themselves; but when we are only half-conscious, it is not that we experience something that we recognise does not make sense – making sense of things just is not something we are even trying to do. In that half-conscious state we do not make sense of things, we just 'cope'. I mean this term in a more basic sense than that given to it by Dreyfus,¹¹⁷ where it runs the gamut from basic coping to the chess-playing of a Grand Master. To cope, in the sense that interests me, is to muddle through, to get by as best one can; and we spend rather a lot of time coping in this sense. If this line of thought is right, then there is a whole domain of experience – the domain that

¹¹⁶ Cf. Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense', in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (Penguin, 1976), pp. 46-7.

¹¹⁷ See Dreyfus (2005), 'Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 79, 2, pp. 47-65.

most fascinated Samuel Beckett – that Gadamer’s account passes over in silence.¹¹⁸ Pressing this point further, what the contrast with Beckett shows is that, while for Beckett confusion and failure are the central features of human life (against which clarity and success are to be seen by contrast), for Gadamer the central feature is the way the world always already more or less makes sense to us (and it is against this background that experiences of incomprehension stand out). As we will see in Ch. 3, it is precisely because of this that he so highly values those disruptive experiences that startle us out of our too-easy complacency.

This is not to suggest that for Gadamer the linguistic world is simply clear and pre-given. The ontology of language is not to be mistaken for the disappointed hope that finds expression in Charles Simic’s poem ‘The Dictionary’:

Maybe there is a word in it somewhere
To describe the world this morning,
A word for the way the early light
Takes delight in chasing the darkness
Out of store windows and doorways.

Another word for the way it lingers
Over a pair of wire-rimmed glasses
Someone let drop on the sidewalk
Last night and staggered off blindly
Talking to himself or breaking into song.¹¹⁹

There is, in other words, no expectation that, if being is language, then there is always the perfect word ready to hand to express any given phenomenon. As we have seen, it is not that things are already pre-given in language, but rather that human experience of the world involves things constantly coming *into* language. For Gadamer, the constant struggle is to find the *right* word, and part of the

¹¹⁸ One will not find it in *Truth and Method*, and nor does it come up in Gadamer’s later essay ‘Boundaries of Language’ (from 1985), translated by Lawrence K. Schmidt and collected in Schmidt (ed.), *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*.

¹¹⁹ Charles Simic, *The Lunatic* (Ecco, 2015), p. 11.

dynamic quality of experience is that the right word is always elusive: any given verbal formulation is always, finally, inadequate. One might think that this makes him closer to Beckett than I have allowed, if we think of Beckett's poem 'What is the word':

folly –
folly for to –
for to –
what is the word –
folly from this –
all this –
folly from all this –
given –
folly given all this –
seeing –
folly seeing all this –
this –
what is the word –
[... etc.]¹²⁰

The poem continues on, and continues to fail to find the right word to express the thing it is searching for. The difference, however, is that for Gadamer the mind is more or less at home, and the moments of puzzlement stand out; even the fully alert mind is not fully present to itself, and is forever engaged in trying to articulate an insight that runs ahead of it (we will return to this particular theme in Ch. 4). For Beckett, it is the 'dim mind wayfaring / through barren lands', a mind 'hedged about / going out / gone out';¹²¹ the mind rarely feels at home.

Structurally, Gadamer's ontology of language directs our attention towards the world as it is given (through our tradition), and away from the murkier, puzzling base from which it arises and within which it always dwells. This

¹²⁰ *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Seán Lawlor & John Pilling (Grove, 2012), pp. 228-9.

¹²¹ *Collected Poems*, p. 110.

murkier base is rooted both in the largely inarticulate drives and desires that give direction to human experience, and also in the mysterious nature of being that language is an elaboration of. Charles Taylor is quite right to point out that what is distinctive about human needs, desires and drives (as opposed to those of other animals) is that they are taken up by and transformed through language,¹²² and there is no doubt that Gadamer would agree with this. But the problem remains that the ontology of language directs our attention towards the already linguistically intelligible, and treats what is not linguistically intelligible as simply in need of linguistic articulation. One can accept this as an entirely desirable aim while still doubting that it need be the only aim with regard to the linguistically inarticulate. Beckett's oft-quoted dictum

To drill one hole after another into [language] until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through – I cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer¹²³

expresses an aim that runs entirely counter to the thrust of Gadamer's position. And yet, if we take seriously the idea that things are brought into language – even though the very distinction between inside and outside of language is one made *within* language – then we cannot help but be haunted by that which is prior to our articulation, even though we cannot talk about it without thereby bringing it into language, thus missing our mark by the very act of aiming at it.

If we treat the experience of being at home in the world and being able to make sense of it as the central kind of experience, we lose sight of the way in which it is an achievement rooted in a deeper experience, that of puzzlement and muddling through. Even if most of us much of the time find ourselves reasonably self-present, this is because we manage to forget how puzzling everything is, and there are times for all of us when we regress to this puzzlement. We do not easily have cognitive access to such experience, since the demands of cognition force it into shape. It is part of Beckett's achievement to have found ways of bringing

¹²² See the papers collected in *Human Agency and Language*, especially 'The Self-interpreting Animal', as well as his more recent and substantial statement of this position in *The Language Animal*.

¹²³ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 518.

such experience into artistic expression without thereby nullifying them. If we ignore it we wind up with a distorted picture of human beings, and our ability make sense of them is hampered. This is evident, for instance, in the ongoing debate between Dreyfus and McDowell, which inherits a broadly Gadamerian conception of the linguisticity of experience.¹²⁴ Rather than entering into the details of their debate, I would just call attention to the peculiarity of one of their central examples, which I think is telling: the experience of the chess Grand Master playing chess. The point at issue between them is the extent to which an experience of knowing accompanies the Grand Master's ability to just see which move they should next make; the observation I would like to make is just how peculiar it is to treat an example of hyper-skilled, expert activity as the central paradigm of human experience. The drunk, the person who is exhausted or half asleep, someone who is worrying about something or otherwise distracted, someone in a state of depression, or someone trying to learn a new skill under pressure and feeling the stress: these are all people in states that are perfectly common – more common than that of the chess Grand Master! – and yet that do not at all fit that model. They are not fully self-present, and would likely be unable to offer adequate after-the-fact accounts of what they are doing or why (which McDowell especially associates with the Grand Master's capacity to see the right move).¹²⁵ They are, rather, muddling through: perhaps trying to achieve the best outcome, but perhaps not; perhaps trying to make sense of what they are doing, but perhaps not.

Beckett's Molloy is hardly a picture of a complete human being. His capacity to interact with other people is comically atrophied: it is only with great effort that he can make any sense of what others are saying to him, or make himself understood by them. With his mother he can only communicate by knocking her on the head: 'One knock for yes, two no, three I don't know, four money, five goodbye.'¹²⁶ He cares little if she confuses all of these, so long as she understands that four knocks means money. His incapacity for dialogue, and the self-interest and instinct for self-preservation that drive his interactions with others, mark

¹²⁴ See the essays collected in Scheer (ed.), *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate* (Routledge, 2013).

¹²⁵ *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World*, pp. 46-7.

¹²⁶ *The Works of Samuel Beckett*, 2:14.

him out as in many ways the negative image of Gadamer's ideal character: always conversing, open to the challenge to one's own priorities offered by the other. But he is not a simple opposite to be held in contrast; he is a deeper, obscurer part of the same person, that part of oneself that is prior (in an ontological, rather than temporal sense) to the shaping of one's self through the aspirations and ideals given in language, and that persists underneath;¹²⁷ a part that has been elided in Gadamer's account.

¹²⁷ See again Charles Taylor, 'The Self-interpreting Animal'.

II – Interlude: Heightened Experience

We have now set out Gadamer's basic account of ordinary experience, as pieced together from his various discussions of prejudice and the linguistic nature of all experience. The time has almost come for us to turn to the main event, his concept of 'genuine' experience; but before we do that, we must briefly consider what he considers to be a rival but deficient mode of experience, that of *Erlebnis*, what we can call 'heightened experience'. It is important to note, up front, that Gadamer uses the term *Erlebnis* in a particular and limited sense, and that he has particular polemical aims in his discussion of it; my concern in the present chapter is only to set out the concept in terms of how it functions in his philosophical economy.

The concept of *Erlebnis* is introduced at the end of TM I.1 2 B(i), and then discussed in detail in B(ii) and (iii). Gadamer tells us that it is etymologically related to the verb *erleben*:

Erleben means primarily "to be alive when something happens". Thus the word suggests the immediacy with which something real is grasped – unlike something which one presumes to know but which is unattested by one's own experience, whether because it is taken over from others or comes from hearsay, or whether it is inferred, surmised, or imagined. What is experienced is always what one has experienced oneself. (TM 53)

Further to this, the form '*das Erlebte*' refers to the 'permanent content of what is experienced'. It is, in other words, what is retained from experience, what 'achieves permanence, weight, and significance from out of the transience of experiencing'. The concept is thus ambiguous, in the same ways as the English word 'experience', between experiences that we have, and being 'experienced'; or, as Gadamer puts it, between experience and its result (TM 56).¹²⁸ Someone who is experienced at something is someone who has lots of experience *at* it, which suggests they have had lots of experiences *of* it.

¹²⁸ The same basic point is made by Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience*, p. 11.

After setting out the basic history of the word and its ambiguity (TM I 2 B[ii]), Gadamer goes on to discuss it as a concept (B[iii]). The discussion in this chapter is dense and tricky, with terse references to Dilthey, Husserl, Nietzsche, Natorp, Bergson, Schleiermacher, and Simmel; and it presents, by my count, four different (albeit connected) kinds of *Erlebnis*.¹²⁹ Presenting a reading of it is further complicated by its place within Gadamer's argument. After all, the discussion of *Erlebnis* occurs towards the end of the first half of TM I, and this first half is concerned with setting out the 'aesthetic dimension' in order to offer a *critique* of it; thus, Gadamer's discussion of *Erlebnis* is a hostile one: its development, he says, is driven by the needs of epistemology,¹³⁰ and in both Dilthey and Husserl it serves an epistemological function.¹³¹ At the end of the chapter, he claims that the paradigm of *Erlebnis* is aesthetic experience, and it is the idea of aesthetic experience that he is trying to overcome. Nonetheless, the concept is important for us. (1) When Gadamer introduces the concept of *Erfahrung*, it is explicitly in contrast with *Erlebnis*; so to grasp the importance of this concept, we will need to see what it is contrasted with. (2) Even though *Erfahrung* is the kind of experience that Gadamer privileges, not every experience is *Erfahrung*, and we would be in a sorry state if it were. (3) An *Erlebnis* is still a kind of experience, even if it is not the highest kind. Thus, in what follows, I will try to excavate an acceptable concept of *Erlebnis* from Gadamer's discussion of it in the chapters under consideration; then I will discuss the way he transitions from *Erlebnis* to *Erfahrung* in TM I.1 3 B.

The first three stages of his discussion I will pass over; it is the final stage, at which the discussion culminates, that is of interest to us.¹³² What emerges in this final part is that an *Erlebnis* is an experience that stands out: it breaks the flow of life, while also reflecting the whole of life within it (TM 60). It is not, then, a

¹²⁹ The discussion of *Erlebnis* proceeds as follows: *first*, Gadamer discusses it as a 'unity of meaning'; *second*, as conceived through memory, i.e. 'my experiences'; *third*, in connection with life; and *fourth*, as something undergone, an adventure, culminating with aesthetic experience as the paradigm.

¹³⁰ 'Thus [Dilthey's] concepts are motivated by this epistemological purpose or rather by the needs of epistemology itself.' (TM 56)

¹³¹ 'Thus both in Dilthey and in Husserl, both in life philosophy and in phenomenology, the concept of *Erlebnis* is primarily purely epistemological.' (TM 57)

¹³² For a more detailed discussion of the relation between Gadamer and Dilthey on *Erlebnis*, see Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, pp. 28ff.

radical break, but rather one that serves to further the normal course of life precisely by being a departure from it. In this it is like an adventure 'from which one emerges enriched and more mature' (ibid.).¹³³ This is the essence of an 'aesthetic' experience, in that the work of art 'suddenly tears the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, and yet relates him back to the whole of his existence' (TM 60-1).

The essence of the heightened experience, then, is that it is an experience that stands out from the flow of ordinary life, but does not (radically) change that life (cf. TM 86). One 'emerges' from an *Erlebnis* 'enriched and more mature', perhaps, but one's life, and one's priorities, have not been called into question. Examples of this (beyond the example of 'aesthetic experience' [*Erlebniskunst*], which Gadamer is arguing against) may include going on a holiday: when I go on holiday somewhere, I leave behind my ordinary life (my job, my chores, and so on), and instead live for a little while in an entirely different mode. But at the same time, this other mode of life reflects my ordinary life, both by being differentiated from it, and because the way my ordinary life makes possible the holiday – the holiday serves almost to 'redeem' my ordinary life, in particular my job, which allows me to build up the funds to be able to go away, care-free, for a little while. Or, perhaps, as a musician, when I go on stage and perform and receive applause and accolades, this experience stands out from my ordinary day (which is spent practicing, even on those days I do not feel like it) and makes it all worthwhile.¹³⁴

Gadamer's opposition has two related elements. The first, which is most prominent in the part of the book under consideration, has to do with the technicalities of aesthetic experience; and this, while essential to the structure of *Truth and Method*, is not what interests us for our present purposes. His objection is that aesthetic experience has been divorced from the questions of knowledge and truth; but, as can be seen from my examples of *Erlebnis* above,

¹³³ It is worth noting, however, that while Gadamer deploys this metaphor in a critical way, in a later essay he uses the metaphor of an adventure to explicate what is going on when one understands: 'Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy', RAS 109-110.

¹³⁴ That some kinds of experience can be heightened in this way *without* being genuine experiences (in Gadamer's sense) is missed by some commentators. See, for example, Anne Marie Olesen (2000), 'The Concept of (Aesthetic) Experience in Gadamer's Hermeneutics and its Anthropological Implications', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 12, 20, p. 74.

this is not a pressing concern for us, since these experiences which serve to reinforce and redeem ordinary experience *may well have truth on their side*. It is Gadamer's second objection that is more interesting to us: an *Erlebnis* does not call into question the basis of my ordinary life; it does not call on me to change it.¹³⁵ This is what I meant above by 'radical' change: a change in my outlook, a change in my priorities.¹³⁶

Let us briefly look at Gadamer's critique of Romantic hermeneutics, as an illustration of his polemical employment of *Erlebnis*.¹³⁷ On the view he is criticising, one is trying to 'recreate' the experience of the author of the text, or the experience of the 'original readers'¹³⁸ of the text. Both involve my somehow leaping out of my own experiences and experiencing things from another's perspective; I then return to myself with a deeper understanding of the text I am investigating. We can see how this parallels the examples of *Erlebnisse* I gave above: the experience of imaginatively reconstructing the experience of the author/reader is something of an adventure, in that for a short period I become somebody else; and my return vindicates the hard work of reading I have been doing that has allowed me to grasp this other's perspective.

Gadamer's criticism of this has two elements. (1) First, there is the sceptical element: he does not think that it is possible. (a) Relying on the concepts of the present assimilates the historical text to the present:

The historian usually chooses concepts to describe the historical particularly of his objects without expressly reflecting on their origin and justification. He simply follows his interest in the material and takes no account of the fact that the descriptive concepts he chooses can be highly detrimental to his proper purpose if they assimilate what is historically different to what is familiar and thus, despite all

¹³⁵ As Weinsheimer puts it: 'The genuineness of the experience of art is indicated by the fact that it alters the one who experiences it; it alters the understanding subject.' (*Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 99.)

¹³⁶ Warnke notes that Dilthey's concept of *Erlebnis* is actually compatible with this idea of transformative experiences: see her *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, p. 29.

¹³⁷ I have in mind here the discussion in TM III 1(B).

¹³⁸ Gadamer takes the very idea of an 'original reader' to be an 'unexamined idealisation' (TM 396).

impartiality, subordinate the alien being of the object to his own preconceptions. Thus, despite his scientific method, he behaves just like everyone else – as a child of his own time who is unquestioningly dominated by the concepts and prejudices of his own age. (TM 397)

(b) Rejecting the concepts of the present, and instead relying only on the concepts of the past does not help either:

Insofar as the historian does not admit this naiveté to himself [i.e. he fails to reflect on the concepts he is applying to the text], he fails to reach the level of reflection that the subject matter demands. But his naiveté becomes truly abysmal when he starts to become aware of the problems it raises and so demands that in understanding history one must leave one's own concepts aside and think only in the concepts of the epoch one is trying to understand. (TM 398)

This demand, he notes, goes 'unfulfilled'. But this sceptical move is mere ground laying; the real force of Gadamer's critique comes in the second element: (2) The very ideal of transposing oneself into the past is mistaken as an ideal. This is because, Gadamer argues, the interests that ground our historical inquiries are rooted in the present. I will quote this important passage at length:

[W]hat the legitimate demand of the historical consciousness – to understand a period in terms of its own concepts – really means is something quite different. The call to leave aside the concepts of the present does not mean a naive transposition into the past. It is, rather, an essentially relative demand that has meaning only in relation to one's own concepts. Historical consciousness fails to understand its own nature if, in order to understand, it seeks to exclude what alone makes understanding possible. *To think historically* means, in fact, *to perform the transposition that the concepts of the past undergo* when we try to think in them. To think historically always involves mediating between those ideas and one's own thinking. To try to

escape from one's own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one's own preconceptions into play so that the text's meaning can really be made to speak for us. (TM 398)

We can frame this in terms of *Erlebnis*. If we take historical research to consist in moments in which we bracket the present and think in terms of historical research – engage in an historical *adventure*, in other words – we cannot understand what we are doing unless we make sense of it in terms of the present. Once we bring the present into the picture, however, we see that '*to perform the transposition that the concepts of the past undergo* when we try to think in them' means a move from our *present* concepts to the *past* concepts; and this move is going to vary depending on what those present concepts are. Further, one does not simply find the past concepts lying there, such that one could just pick them up; we only work out what the past concepts are by allowing our present ones to be challenged.

Gadamer's treatment of heightened experience is, we have said, polemical. For his purposes in *Truth and Method* this makes sense; but if we are interested in human experience more broadly then it is a rejection that comes with a great loss. For a great many of our most important experiences are heightened in precisely the sense here discussed: they shine so bright as to cause other parts of our lives to glow with reflected light. I gave, before, the example of the musician whose heightened experience on stage reflects back on and redeems the long hours of toil and frustration that accompany the daily practice; but it would be mad for the musician to for this reason find her experience on stage *lacking*, for her to wish for the genuine experience of having her expectations and outlook challenged. Similarly, a wedding is a celebration that serves in many ways to reinforce and perhaps redeem the past experiences of the bride and groom: there is a common trope in fiction that the bride or groom will say in their wedding speech that all of the bad decisions they had made in the past were redeemed because they had led to their meeting this person, their to-be-spouse.

A wedding that mounts a challenge to their expectations may be no wedding at all.

Erlebnis is, for Gadamer, an experience that interrupts ordinary experience, but does not serve to call the concepts that underlie that experience into question. Once it is over, it leaves everything pretty much where it was. As we will see later, his denigration of this kind of experience will raise issues for his account of experience as a whole. Nonetheless, it is time for the main event: against *Erlebnis*, Gadamer opposes the concept of *Erfahrung*.

III – Genuine Experience

There is an image of Gadamer abroad that pictures him as an arch-totaliser, a philosopher so bent on the primacy of tradition that the individual more or less disappears. He has no doubt facilitated this image by saying things like: ‘The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life’ (TM 278). In the first chapter, I attempted to argue against the ‘idealist’ reading of Gadamer that sees the individual as ontologically nothing more than an epiphenomenon of the tradition, urging instead a ‘materialist’ reading that sees us internalise the prejudices of our tradition (which ‘constitute the historical reality of [our] being’, as Gadamer goes on to say) through our engagement with it. In the next two chapters, we will see that Gadamer’s concept of ‘genuine experience’ (and its connection with his concept of truth and the ontology of language) provides some insight into how this happens.

There is a further image of Gadamer, connected with the first, which sees him as insisting on agreement and stifling disagreement and contradiction. On this view, Gadamer’s insistence that we understand each other *prior* to dialogue – that we already stand in the open space of the tradition, and on this basis converse – gives me implicit licence to suppose that I ultimately do understand the other, and that seemingly radical disagreement is a mere surface phenomenon. It would give me licence, in other words, to suppose that, at their core, those who seem to insist on their radical difference actually deep down agree with whatever it is I think. As we will see, this image grows doubtful if we pay close attention to Gadamer’s concept of genuine experience.

This concept of genuine experience [*Erfahrung*] is the central concept of Gadamer’s whole hermeneutics, as the next two chapters will attempt to show. As opposed to ‘ordinary experience’, in which our expectations are more or less left untouched, and as opposed to ‘heightened experience’, in which our expectations are reflected back to us and affirmed, *Erfahrung* covers those experiences in which something is challenged and we are forced to see things anew. In this chapter, we will examine Gadamer’s development of this concept in *Truth and Method*, and its connection with his discussion of the virtue of

phronesis. In the following chapter, we will see how *Erfahrung* is deeply connected with Gadamer's concepts of truth, understanding and interpretation.

1. *Erfahrung*: Genuine Experience

It is easiest to begin an account of genuine experience with its negative image: Don Quixote.¹³⁹ The opening premise of *Don Quixote* is well known: a man spends too much time reading tales of chivalry and knights errant, and winds up going mad, believing that he himself could win fame and fortune through a life of knight errantry. The comedy of his madness¹⁴⁰ revolves around his ability to assimilate the most outrageous affronts to his expectations without his convictions wavering in the slightest. Thus, when he comes upon an inn, he is convinced it is a castle, and that the prostitutes hanging about out the front are ladies from the castle taking air (Part I, Ch. 2); and a brass basin, being worn on the head of a barber to keep his hat dry in the rain, Don Quixote sees as the legendary golden helmet of Mambrino – once he has chased away the barber and tried it on, finding it too big for his head and a peculiar shape for a helmet, he is forced to declare that some previous possessor of the helmet must have had a huge head, or had failed to realise that it was a legendary helmet and had turned it into a bowl: he vows to restore it to its original shape (Part I, Ch. 21). Don Quixote is the man whose prejudices are secure from challenge: when his prejudices and the world do not match up, it is the world that must give way.

Genuine experience is the opposite of this: when confronted, it is the prejudices that give way. Gadamer presents his elucidation of genuine experience in one of the central chapters of *Truth and Method*, 'The concept of experience [*Erfahrung*] and the essence of the hermeneutic experience' (TM 341-355). The trouble with previous accounts of experience, he says, is that they have not taken experience seriously enough in itself; there was a tendency, from Aristotle to Hegel, to treat experience in terms of its contribution to the formation of the concept, but not as

¹³⁹ *Don Quijote*, trans. Burton Raffel (Norton, 1999).

¹⁴⁰ I have in mind the early chapters of the first part, up until the point at which Don Quixote goes into the mountains to do his 'penance'. An interpretation of the novel as a whole is beyond the scope of our present interest.

something to be taken seriously in itself (TM 347). What is important about experience is that it is something that we undergo, a process that happens to us, over which we have little control. What we take away from particular experiences, or repeated experiences, is often not what we may have intended to, going in to them; the process by which this or that experience stays with us is quite obscure.

He distinguishes two senses of 'experience': on the one hand, there are experiences that conform to our expectations and confirm them (both ordinary experience and heightened experience, as I have distinguished them, fall into this camp); on the other, there are experiences that defy our expectations, and lead us to see the object in a new light, and now see it better (TM 347-8). To put this in terms of the prejudice structure of understanding, there are experiences that conform to our prejudices, and others that call them into question; these latter Gadamer terms 'genuine experiences'. What is important about these 'negative' experiences is that they are not mere corrections, but allow us to 'acquire a comprehensive knowledge'. Thus 'we cannot [...] have a new experience of any object at random, but it must be of such a nature that we gain a better knowledge through it, not only of itself, but of what we thought we knew before – i.e., of a universal' (TM 348). In other words, genuine experiences lead us to a deeper understanding of the things they are experiences of; they are thus 'dialectical', in that they occur in the space between how I take something to be and how it is. When an experience conforms to my expectations, it lulls me into forgetting that there is more to the thing experienced than the way it presents itself to me, such that I may well even begin to forget my finitude: I come to forget that I am surrounded by things that are not reducible to my understanding of them. When an experience defies my expectations, I am recalled to the fact that the thing has its own reality. As we have seen, for Gadamer my anticipations are guided by 'prejudices'. While prejudices operate unprovoked, we do not realise we have them; it is only through their provocation that we become aware of them (TM 298-9).

For Gadamer there is no end to new experience; and so the concept of genuine experience 'stands in an ineluctable opposition' to scientific or technical knowledge (TM 350). Technical experience is exhausted by the achievement of

some end; scientific experience is exhausted in the completion of the concept. Both contain an implicit idea of perfectibility, in that they point toward the possibility of the perfection of our knowledge. Genuine experience, on the other hand, always points to the possibility of new experiences, and this means that to become experienced is to become 'radically undogmatic'; 'the dialectic of experience has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself'. All experience is acquired through disappointment, and 'every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation'.¹⁴¹ Ultimately, what experience teaches us is not 'this or that particular thing', but 'insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine'; experience is experience of human finitude (TM 351).¹⁴² It teaches us insight, and to become insightful is 'part of the vocation of man'. William James nicely expresses this view when he says: 'I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them - I absolutely do not care which - as if it never could be re-interpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude.'¹⁴³

On the basis of this account of genuine experience, Gadamer turns to hermeneutical experience. Hermeneutical experience, it turns out, is not a distinct kind of experience but a subspecies of genuine experience; and he elucidates it by way of three major changes – all of which are developed in parallel with an account of experience of the 'Thou'.¹⁴⁴ Hermeneutical experience

¹⁴¹ It is worth noting that, while it is essential to Gadamer's account that no knowledge is to be insisted on dogmatically as 'secure', he is *not* a fallibilist, for reasons discussed in the first chapter.

¹⁴² The reader will recall the parallel I drew with Montaigne in the introduction: 'When I find myself convicted of a false opinion by another man's reasoning, I do not so much learn what new thing he has told me and this particular bit of ignorance – that would be small gain – as I learn my weakness in general, and the treachery of my understanding' (*Complete Works*, pp. 1001-2).

¹⁴³ 'The Will to Believe', collected in *Writings 1878-1899* (Library of America, 1992), p. 466. He goes on a few pages later: 'There is indeed nothing which someone has not thought absolutely true, while his neighbour deemed it absolutely false; and not an absolutist among them seems ever to have considered that the trouble may all the time be essential, and that the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible signal for knowing whether it be truth or no.' (p. 468)

¹⁴⁴ This is what distinguishes Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy from that of the early Heidegger, for whom hermeneutics is not primarily about understanding what is other to me but rather understanding myself.

is experience of a *tradition*, he says; but a tradition is not something that we simply know, but is rather itself language – ‘it expresses itself like a Thou’ (TM 352). And it is for this reason that his elaboration of hermeneutical experience runs in parallel with his explication of the experience of the Thou.

The first of the major differences of an experience of an other (as opposed to an object) is that our goal is *not* to discern ‘human nature’ so that we can develop some kind of theory of the other that would allow us to predict them. Citing Kant, Gadamer claims that this would contradict the ‘moral definition’ of man by making the other into something *useful*. Likewise, to take the tradition as an object that we are trying to interpret methodologically flattens it out.

The second major difference develops this thought: not only am I not trying to develop a predictive theory of the other, something has also gone wrong when I try to reflectively grasp the other’s position in advance, holding myself to have understood it better than they do, such that I do not need to listen to them. ‘The claim to understand the other person in advance functions to keep the other person’s claim at a distance’ (TM 354); ‘a person who reflects himself out of the mutuality of such a relation [sc. that of mutual recognition] changes this relationship and destroys its moral bond’ (354). The parallel for hermeneutical experience occurs when we try to grasp the past ‘historically’, and claim to understand it ‘objectively’ and ‘free of prejudices’. Rather, to understand tradition I must ‘think within [my] own historicity’ (TM 355).

The third major difference is the culmination of the previous two, and is the ‘highest type of hermeneutical experience’ (TM 355): to properly experience the other is to listen to them, which means to be open to them. What this requires is that I attend to them, and ensure that I remain open. ‘Openness to the other [...] involves recognising that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so’ (TM 355). The hermeneutical parallel is that if I am to actually understand the tradition, I have to acknowledge its validity by allowing it to speak to me. To fail in this is to ‘smooth over’ historical texts beforehand, so that ‘the criteria of the historian’s own knowledge can never be called into question by the tradition’ (TM 355). Historically effected consciousness must let itself be affected by the tradition’s claim to truth. ‘The hermeneutical consciousness culminates not in methodological sureness of itself,

but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma' (TM 355).

These three points can be summarised thus: in many of our engagements with others, to take them only as an object to study is not only morally problematic, it also entirely misses the point of our interest in them.¹⁴⁵ The consciousness that seeks only a complete 'understanding' of the other, such that everything they say and do is explicable and predictable in advance, is a consciousness that seeks to do without others entirely; it is a consciousness that seeks satisfaction entirely within itself – that seeks, in other words, to become unbounded by anything else. But this means to lose sight of our finitude. This insight can only be realised by *listening*: attending carefully to the other such that I take them as having something to say *to me*, such that what they say can call into challenge what I had taken for granted.

Gadamer says his account of experience stands in opposition to scientific knowledge. What are we to make of this? The first thing to be said is that it is not merely natural-scientific knowledge that he has in mind, but rather scientific knowledge in the broad sense of the term: the increasing perfection of the concept.¹⁴⁶

We have said that experience is an inherently dialectical process: experiences are understood in light of our anticipations, which are either fulfilled or unfulfilled; genuine experience occurs when our anticipations are defied, and the independence of the thing is thrust upon us, which leads us to see the thing anew; and reconciliation occurs as our understanding of the thing and ourselves deepens in light of this new experience. Experience emerges, then, in the interplay of anticipations and the thing experienced. For Hegel the end point of the dialectic of experience is a form of 'absolute knowing' in which consciousness

¹⁴⁵ There are certain well-defined contexts in which taking a human as an object is unproblematic: human biology, psychology and medicine are three such contexts. It is also not always a bad thing to be taken as an object to be worked on, either: one is quite happy to have one's doctor treat one as an object of medical concern. The trouble starts when one takes the modes of understanding proper to these contexts and applies it more generally.

¹⁴⁶ See Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, p. 26, where she observes Gadamer's distinction 'between two senses of *Erfahrung* itself: the scientific sense, emphasising the way experiences or experiments confirm one another, and a dialectical or historical sense that emphasises negativity'.

and object become identical. In other words, when my anticipations are defied my understanding deepens, and this will eventually lead to the point at which my understanding is perfected, and my anticipations are never again defied.

Experience, in the 'genuine' sense, would be overcome, and its possibility would henceforth be excluded. For Don Quixote, by contrast, genuine experience is excluded by the firmness of his prejudices, but it has not been overcome, since the world and his prejudices are not in alignment – it always remains a possibility (and in the end he does indeed realise his madness).¹⁴⁷ When Gadamer stresses the importance of the *failure* of expectations, those occasions when we are forced to recognise the inadequacy of our understanding, he is standing in opposition to a philosophical tradition that stretches from Aristotle to the present day, but which Gadamer associates most prominently with Hegel,¹⁴⁸ a tradition that understands experience in terms of its contribution to concept formation, a tradition for which the goal is a finally adequate conception of the world such that 'genuine' experience no longer occurs.

The end point, for Hegel, is the unity of subject and object: once the subject has completely grasped the object's concept, they no longer experience alienation from that object – confusion about it, a sense that they do not quite understand it – and are thus reconciled with it.¹⁴⁹ As Gadamer puts this:

The mind directed toward self-knowledge regards itself as alienated from the "positive" and must learn to reconcile itself with it, seeing it as its own, as its home. By dissolving the hard edge of positivity, it becomes reconciled with itself. (TM 341)

¹⁴⁷ *Don Quijote*, Part II, Ch. 74.

¹⁴⁸ For more on the opposition between Hegel and Gadamer, see Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, pp. 37ff. & 203ff.

¹⁴⁹ More needs to be said, of course: even granting the 'metaphysical' reading, for Hegel it is not the finite subject but rather *Geist* that becomes finally reconciled with its object; the finite subject is reconciled by finding its place within the overall structure (this reading is presented by Charles Taylor, *Hegel*). And this is a contentious reading, because, as Pippin and Pinkard argue, the end point for Hegel might be not so much the final reconciliation of *Geist* (conceived of metaphysically) but rather the insistence on the part of *Geist* (conceived of as reflective human community) that it not take anything for granted, and its recognition that autonomy means not being ruled by reasons it takes as authoritative without being able to say why. See Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge, 1991); and Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge, 1995).

The question is: what then? Such a subject could no longer have 'genuine' experiences (their expectations would never be thwarted). But the very idea of 'genuine' experience calls this into question: the occurrence of a genuine experience is, by definition, not predictable (if it were predictable, it could conform to my expectations, which would make it not genuine experience). This is connected with the problem of induction: no matter how many times one has seen the same thing act the same way in the same circumstances, there is no way to know that the next time won't be different. But the endless openness of experience is also connected with Gadamer's ontology of language: genuine experience is a permanent possibility because things can be brought into language in ever-new ways. 'Since concealment belongs to revelation,' Weinsheimer says, 'one might say that revelation constantly increases its own task. Absolute knowledge thus becomes impossible.'¹⁵⁰

It might seem peculiar to treat Hegel as the paradigm of the scientific attitude, especially today, when many see him as the very model of unscientific obscurity, and, even among those who are his proponents, many jettison his 'scientific' outlook so as to focus on other aspects of his thought.¹⁵¹ But his philosophy is nonetheless the purest example of the impulse to treat experience as contributing to the completion of the concept: the mind strives, in Hegel's view, to attain such a perfect understanding of the world in which it lives that it is no longer alienated by encountering something it cannot readily understand (and affirm). Hegel is far removed from modern science in many ways – not least in his desire that we be able to *affirm* the world when we understand it – but not insofar as the goal of modern science is to arrive at a perfected theoretical grasp of the natural world.

The other kind of knowledge Gadamer says experience is opposed to is technical knowledge. By technical knowledge we should understand *techne* in the Aristotelian sense.¹⁵² Aristotle sets out his definition of *techne* in a few brief

¹⁵⁰ Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 39.

¹⁵¹ See, as an example, Allen Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 5. Wood is talking specifically about Hegel's logic, but logic is, for Hegel, the science of logic.

¹⁵² In what follows I have in mind Gadamer's discussion of *phronesis* and *techne* in the chapter on Aristotle in *Truth and Method*, 'The hermeneutic relevance of Aristotle'. At the end of the present

strokes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹⁵³ At the beginning of Book VI, Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of what ‘admits of being otherwise’ and knowledge of what does not (1139a5-10). What does not admit of being otherwise is the domain of ‘scientific knowing’ (*episteme*); what could be otherwise is the domain of ‘deliberation’ (*bouleusis*), i.e. the domain in which we can make decisions about how things should be (a10-15). In the passage we are concerned with, he goes on to set out a distinction within this latter domain: that between ‘production’ (*poesis*) and ‘action’ (*praxis*). The former is the domain of *techne*, and the latter is the domain of *phronesis*.

Techne is concerned with the production of things that would not otherwise come to be, ‘whose origin is in the producer and not in the product’. In other words, a tree comes to be from its seed on its own accord (assuming favourable conditions, which I might assist with, of course), while a table is produced; the former has its origin ‘in itself’, the latter has its origin ‘in the producer’.¹⁵⁴ *Techne* is ‘a state involving true reason concerned with production’; it is to have an understanding of how, given the appropriate materials, to produce a given product. There is, of course, an element of luck involved (‘*Techne* loves luck, and luck *techne*,’ as Agathon says), since circumstances beyond my control or simply unseen by me may bring my project to ruin – or lead to its success beyond what I had anticipated. But what distinguishes someone who possesses *techne* from someone who does not is that they have an understanding (‘true reason’) of how something is produced, while someone else may be able to produce it but not be able to say how it is done, and someone else may be unable to produce it because they lack any understanding of how it is produced (and might even possess ‘false reason’ concerning it).

In his discussion of *phronesis*,¹⁵⁵ Aristotle states what it is that distinguishes production from action: ‘production has its end beyond it; but action does not, since its end is doing well itself’. That is, the end of *techne* is a well-made

chapter we will discuss the way Gadamer appropriates the concept of *phronesis* for his own purposes.

¹⁵³ Book VI, chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁵⁴ It would seem there can be borderline or mixed cases, too. A well-kept garden, for example, is a combination of what occurs naturally (as plants naturally grow) and human production (as plants do not naturally prune themselves, or keep themselves in neat rows).

¹⁵⁵ NE VI, Ch. 5.

product; to have the *techne* is to be able to reliably produce a well-made product (in light of having the correct understanding of how it is done). It does not matter, so far as the quality of a table is concerned, what state its producer was in when she made it;¹⁵⁶ what matters is that it is well made.¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, an act is not just unless the actor is in a just 'state', which is to say that they (correctly) understand themselves to be acting for the sake of justice: I may outwardly appear to be acting justly, and make out to others that I am acting justly, but if my motive is only to appear just so that I might reap the rewards of the appearance of justice, then I am not acting justly – I am co-opting justice for other purposes.

Now, why would experience be opposed to technical knowledge, as Gadamer claims it is? Genuine experience, we have said, is the experience of one's expectations being defied. Clearly this is something that happens regularly when we are on the way to acquiring technical knowledge, insofar as we lack 'true reason' concerning what we are producing. And it may be something that never really stops happening, at least on occasion, as Aristotle's reference to the relationship between luck and *techne* suggests: no matter how wide-ranging one's experience at producing something is, there might always be something one has not seen before; and no matter how well one understands the process of production, since we cannot exercise perfect control over the materials, there is always the chance that the materials might prove to be unruly and cause my production to come undone. So perhaps this is all the opposition between experience and technical knowledge amounts to: total technical perfection might exclude genuine experience, but as finite beings, perfect technical knowledge just is not possible for us, and it would be hubristic to suppose it is; experience should teach us to be mindful of our technological limits, and not bank too much on technical ingenuity to solve our problems.

But there is a further and deeper problem and opposition between experience and technical knowledge. Let us suppose that we could achieve perfect technical

¹⁵⁶ As Aristotle had already pointed out earlier: NE II, Ch. 4.

¹⁵⁷ Some would argue that somebody in a good state of mind will tend to produce better work, but this does not matter for Aristotle's argument, since this connection is an external and contingent one: a good state of mind might produce better work, but the only criterion is the quality of the work, so whether it was produced happily or angrily or joyfully or resentfully makes no difference so long as it is good.

mastery over our environment, that we could perfectly produce whatever we wanted to, with no risk of failure. In light of what would we decide what to produce? As Aristotle observes, it is in light of what we take to be good for us that we order our production and other activities,¹⁵⁸ so we would produce what we thought was good for us. But, if our aim is to achieve what is good for us, and our conception of what is good is flawed, then no amount of technical knowledge will save us from failure – in achieving what we aimed for we will frustrate our own end: technical projects can fail *even though they are perfect from the technical point of view*. The possibility of genuine experience extends beyond the domain of what can be technically controlled, and so can never be overcome by perfected technical knowledge.

There is another, related issue. When I fail at a technical level, this may tell me that my understanding is inadequate, and that I need to improve it if I am to succeed; regular and repeated failure may lead me to the conclusion that the project just is not technically feasible, and so it will have to be abandoned. But what cannot be called into question, when we approach things only from the technical point of view, is the validity of the project itself, whether it is actually a project worth pursuing. Technical knowledge, in other words, is not concerned about ends, but only with finding and perfecting the means. This means that technical failure *may not count as genuine experience in Gadamer's sense at all*, since such experience is supposed to call me up short and lead me to reflect on the limits of my grasp of the world; technical failure does not (necessarily) call me into question in anything like the same way.¹⁵⁹ Particular failures may teach me 'this or that thing', but the experience only counts as *Erfahrung* if it reaches behind what is immediately at stake and calls into question my concepts, projects, limits, etc.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ NE I, Ch. 1.

¹⁵⁹ Although it always might: for Kuhn, the transition from 'ordinary' science (problem solving within a well-defined area) to 'extraordinary' science (the search for a new account of the basic objects and methods of some scientific domain) occurs when technical failures build and can no longer be taken as minor problems. See *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

¹⁶⁰ As Gadamer remarks elsewhere: '[The pilot] transports all passengers securely to land. But was it good for them that they had arrived? It is possible that Agamemnon's pilot succumbed to doubt after he saw that his master had been murdered.' See Gadamer, 'Notes on Planning for the Future', p. 583.

Rather than knowledge of what something is or how it can be made, Gadamer sees experience as having a different goal: 'insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine' (TM 351).¹⁶¹ In the scientific or technical domains, having our expectations thwarted tells us only that our knowledge is not yet perfect; it does not teach us anything about ourselves.

This brings us to what it is that is distinctive about genuine experience, and how it lies at the foundation of hermeneutical experience. For scientific and technical experience, the anticipations of the subject are *corrected* by experience that does not fulfil them; in genuine experience, my anticipations are *called into question*.¹⁶² The distinction between these two is as follows. Even Don Quixote can recognise some of his errors: when he realises that the inn in which he and Sancho Panza have stayed the night (and inadvertently started a brawl) is in fact *not* a castle, this does not lead him to question any of his other projects or perceptions: he immediately proceeds to declaring that, as a knight errant, he is not required to pay any money for his room and board.¹⁶³ Similarly, on the same night, Don Quixote concocts a potion that, he says, will heal the person who drinks it of any injury. When Sancho drinks it, he is violently ill for several hours, and his injuries are not cured; but there is a ready explanation: 'I think, Sancho, that you've been sorely afflicted because you've not been dubbed a knight, for it strikes me that this magic liquid ought not to be employed by those who are not knights.'¹⁶⁴ In both cases, Don Quixote notes that his expectations were wrong: the inn turns out to be an inn, not a castle; and the magic potion does not have its anticipated effect on Sancho. But the recognition of the error does not go very deep: Don Quixote's identity and his project remain secure, and he remains convinced that there are castles at which knights errant are welcome (this castle

¹⁶¹ Cf. TM 356: 'The dialectical negativity of experience culminates in the idea of being perfectly experienced – i.e., being aware of our finitude and limitedness'.

¹⁶² The exception to this distinction may be what Thomas Kuhn calls periods of 'extraordinary science'. During periods of 'ordinary' science, scientific activity consists of testing hypotheses and trying to correct aspects of the overarching dominant paradigm. But when the dominant paradigm comes into question, the science comes into an 'extraordinary' period, in which the basic concepts come into question. This questioning of basic concepts may run deep enough to count as a genuine experience, but I am happy to leave the question open.

¹⁶³ *Don Quijote*, Part I, Ch. 17.

¹⁶⁴ *Don Quijote*, p. 94.

being in fact an inn is just an aberration) and that this potion is indeed magic (it just does not work for everyone). A genuine experience must run deeper.

Gadamer does not explicitly distinguish between ordinary cases of my anticipations being defied (which merely call for a correction of my anticipations), and those deeper cases (which call something fundamental into question) that are genuinely genuine experiences. Nonetheless, this seems to be implicit in the concept of a genuine experience. Further, it is central to Gadamer's distinction between *techne* and *phronesis*: recall that what *techne* produces is outside of myself, whereas part of what *phronesis* produces is myself. Genuine experience produces an *understanding* (in a technical sense Gadamer sometimes employs, which we will discuss toward the end of the next chapter); by understanding, I change myself. In a later essay, Gadamer remarks: 'This is what I call the hermeneutic character of speech: when we speak to another we do not so much transmit well-defined facts, as place our own aspirations and knowledge in a broader and richer horizon through dialogue with the other.'¹⁶⁵

As an example of genuine experience, let us consider the crucial encounter described by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. There Levinas imagines a person living alone in a kind of paradise. Without the presence of others, this person experiences the whole world as there for their enjoyment: the sea for the pleasure of bathing in, the sun for lying in, the grass for lying on, the fruit of the trees for eating. He or she builds a home for shelter, and stocks its store with supplies, and so on. All of this is done in light of projects that are entirely their own; the idea of other persons, with other projects, never occurs to them. Then Levinas describes the crucial moment: a starving stranger arrives. The face of this starving stranger calls into question all of these projects: how can the life of personal enjoyment be justified in the face of the starving stranger?

We can see how the experience of the face of the other is not of a kind with that of technical failure: technical failure tells me that something has gone wrong with producing this or that, as perhaps the design of one's storeroom needs improving, or a set of shelves falls down because it has been badly built. Rather,

¹⁶⁵ RB 106.

the experience of the other calls into question the whole project of building a storeroom to cater only for one's own needs.¹⁶⁶

This all amounts to a genuine experience: what happens in this moment of the encounter with the other opens various phenomena and projects around me to question. There are all kinds of possible answers to the question, and the experience itself does not determine any of them. It is even possible that I might decide to ignore the starving stranger and continue stocking food for myself – but the experience now will be different, since it has lost its naïveté. The genuine experience changes the way I see things.¹⁶⁷ But it does not amount to a single, isolated moment. For, once the interruption occurs, there is a *temporal* dimension to genuine experience: the work of making sense of it, of trying to figure out what about it was so disruptive, and how to adjust one's view to make sense of it. Perhaps there are genuine experiences that immediately make sense (some forms of revelation or sudden enlightenment seem to suggest such a model), but most do not. It is a genuine experience when one hears a snatch of music that one cannot get out of one's head, from a genre one normally pays no attention to, but that winds up changing one's taste in music. It is a genuine experience when a few obscure lines of poetry lodge in one's memory, appealing to one's attention somehow but without offering up their meaning, but that suddenly become illuminated and illuminating after some later experience. It is a genuine experience when one is struck by a surprising conjunction of elements in a painting that over time offer up surprising depths of meaning. It is a genuine experience when one's worldview is challenged, and a much more strange and puzzling world comes into view. It is a genuine experience when somebody one knows well does something surprising that leads one to re-evaluate what one thought one knew of them. None of these are the work of a moment, and some of them may echo through one's entire life.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Gadamer makes precisely this point in his discussion of the distinction between Aristotle's concepts of *phronesis* and *techne*, TM 315-6.

¹⁶⁷ Gadamer argues that the reason hermeneutics is to be considered practical philosophy is that the hermeneutical encounter changes one's perspective, and thus changes oneself (RAS 110).

¹⁶⁸ It is this constant work of 'making sense', recovering those parts of the past (my personal history, and the history of which I am a part) that do not fit, that is central to Risser's account of hermeneutical 'convalescence' in his *The Life of Understanding* (Northwestern, 2012).

There is a second kind of genuine experience, which we can uncover if we approach from a slightly different direction. Gadamer refers to the 'rigor' of hermeneutic experience consisting in 'uninterrupted listening' (TM 461). We have described hermeneutic experience thus far in terms of experiences that interrupt and call into question what we took for granted; but there is another kind of genuine experience, uninterrupted listening, that Gadamer also seems to have in mind. This kind of experience is not, as in our discussion of Levinas, the encounter with the other that calls my whole way of life into question, but rather any and all encounters with an other when I attend to them as they are present here right now. When I attend to the other, rather than suppose I know what they are going to do or say, my understanding follows their lead, rather than playing by itself; it is receptive to what is other than me, tracing their movements and trying to make sense of them.

Borges's story 'The Circular Ruins' can helpfully illuminate this idea.¹⁶⁹ In this story, a man tries to dream another man into reality. Significantly, he tries two different methods to achieve this; and both have a bearing on this concept of genuine experience. In the first, the man – over a succession of days and nights – dreams an amphitheatre filled with students, to whom he lectures. He soon works out that 'he could expect nothing from those pupils who accepted his doctrine passively, but that he could expect something from those who occasionally dared to oppose him' (p. 40). The former group 'could not ascend to the level of individuals', while the latter 'pre-existed to a slightly greater degree'. What we see in this method is the idea that what is *real* is separate from me in some way – separate from me in a way that demands that I conform to it if I am to understand it. The group that do not contradict the man do not exist except as his projections; but the latter, while still ultimately his projections, attain some small degree of separateness from him by defying him.

For some reason, this approach fails and the man attempts a different method. This second method is much slower and more painstaking: beginning with the heart, he dreams a single man into existence gradually, in exacting detail, beginning with the heart. One might suppose that this method contradicts the first, since the man being dreamed is not even awake for a very long time, and

¹⁶⁹ Collected in Borges, *Ficciones* (Everyman's Library, 1993).

the emphasis is certainly not on him defying his creator. Nonetheless, there is a deep similarity between the two methods. For we are told that the dreamer 'perceived [the heart] and lived it from all angles and distances' and then later that dreaming 'the innumerable hair [i.e. strand by strand] was perhaps the most difficult task' (p. 42). It is as though by dreaming the man in such detail those details become fixed: what was the creation of his own mind becomes fixed in such a way that he cannot merely alter it by whim. (This is perhaps a parable for the creation of a fiction.) What was his creation becomes, over time, something fixed to which he must conform himself.

And so if we return to Gadamer's concept of experience, we can see the same motif at work. We recall Gadamer's suspicion about attempts to 'understand' the other in the sense of creating a working model of them which we use to predict what they will do, and which we feel allows us to stop attending to them. This is a sentiment we find expressed by Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita*, when he writes:

We expect our friends to follow this or that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them. ... We have it arranged in our minds, and the less often we see a particular person the more satisfying it is to check how obediently he conforms to our notion of him every time we hear of him. Any deviation in the fates we have ordained would strike us as not only anomalous but unethical. We would prefer not to have known at all our neighbour, the retired hot-dog stand operator, if it turns out he has just produced the greatest book of poetry his age has seen.¹⁷⁰

To understand others (in this bad sense) is to deny them reality; and this is why Gadamer claims that to listen and attend to the other is the highest type of hermeneutical experience (TM 355). This is Gadamer's meaning when he says: 'Openness to the other [...] involves recognising that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so' (TM 355).

¹⁷⁰ Nabokov, *Novels 1955-1962* (Library of America, 1996), p. 249.

It seems to me that these two kinds of genuine experience work together. For the important kind of experience for Gadamer is the kind that leads me to see things anew; attending to the other keeps me open to the things they might say or do that will lead to such a challenge to my perspective. What Gadamer is constantly on guard against is our propensity to withdraw into ourselves, to suppose that our understanding is already adequate, and that we need only interpret things through the lens of existing categories – this is to sever the most vital part of our connection with the world around us. We will pick this up in our discussion of *phronesis* in the next section.

Now that we have reached this point, it will come as no surprise that Gadamer immediately follows his discussion of experience with a chapter on the nature of the question. ‘We cannot have experiences without asking questions,’ he notes (TM 356), so an analysis of questions is undertaken to ‘examine the *logical structure of openness* that characterises hermeneutical consciousness’. This openness of the question ‘culminates in a radical negativity: the knowledge of not knowing’, which is to say, Socratic ignorance.

A question is not simply a particular kind of speech act – not every performance of asking a question actually serves as a question in the sense Gadamer is interested in. Rhetorical questions, pedagogical questions, leading questions, and so on are not questions in this fundamental sense because – regardless of what other functions they may have – they do not arise because the subject matter has become questionable for the speaker, nor do they serve to make it so. (Although, in the case of rhetorical or pedagogical questions, they may serve to make the subject matter questionable for the person addressed by them.) A question, in Gadamer’s expression, ‘breaks open’ its object (TM 357). This is to say that something that is not questionable appears as determinate, as obviously being what it appears to be; when it becomes questionable, it becomes indeterminate, it becomes puzzling – we see that how we had previously taken it might not exhaust its possibilities, that we may have been mistaken about the truth of it: ‘Every true question requires this openness’ (TM 357). In this it is structurally similar to genuine experience, in that it moves from understanding, to puzzlement – and then, hopefully, back to understanding. And, in the same

way as genuine experience, questions often pose themselves to us – ‘Thus questioning too is more a passion than an action. A question presses itself on us; we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion’ (TM 360).¹⁷¹

There are two ways we could take this ‘passion’ of questioning. On the one hand, Gadamer may be claiming that the questioner has no active role to play in questioning; they are beholden to questions occurring to them. On the other hand, Gadamer may be claiming that, as with genuine experience, one cannot determine in advance what will become questionable, and what questions will occur to us. It is this latter reading that makes better sense of the text, particularly Gadamer’s frequent reference to Socrates: the wisdom of Socrates consists in knowing that one does not know, which is an activity in itself; it would be all too easy to slip back into the passivity of received opinion. The activity of the questioner is thus that of resisting the temptation to suppose that what they take for granted really is the case. Ignoring this activity, and focussing instead on the activity of simply trying to find questions, leads to the asking of forced questions, which are often unfruitful, or questions that unthinkingly serve only to protect our pre-existing opinions, or questions that serve only to disrupt and undermine the process of trying to come to a better understanding (as we see acted out in Plato’s *Euthydemus*). So the force of this claim, that questioning is ‘more a passion than an action’, is not that *trying* to question things is a pointless activity (since questions can only occur *to us*), but rather that the activity of trying to question is best directed towards bearing in mind that one does not know, and allowing things to become questionable, rather than casting about for specific questions (since the right question cannot be determined in advance – there is no method for determining it, TM 360-1).¹⁷²

A question is not a neutral thing. It does not simply lay bare the phenomena, but does so in a particular way. It has a sense, which involves a ‘sense of direction’ (TM 357-8). In other words, ‘a question places what is questioned in a particular perspective’ (ibid.). This perspective is determined by the ‘horizon’ of

¹⁷¹ ‘Passion’ needs to be understood in its relation to ‘passive’, which is not necessarily the first sense one hears – to be ‘passionate’ about questioning is not what is meant, and so the translation is potentially misleading.

¹⁷² We will take this up again with a discussion of the virtue of *phronesis* in Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

the question, that background of assumptions that give it determinate force; a question does not render everything questionable, but rather holds some things steady so that a limited area can be opened to question.

Questions serve to disrupt popular opinions, and prevent us from simply taking things for granted as we have been told they are or as we have come to expect them. As Gadamer puts it, 'the sudden occurrence of the question is already a breach in the smooth front of popular opinion' (TM 360). In a discussion of literary theories that owe some intellectual debt to this part of Gadamer's thought, Terry Eagleton has challenged the idea of privileging this kind of experience in which the routine is called into question:

That many routine norms and conventions may be positive, to be cherished rather than challenged, is scarcely considered. What of the norms that govern the rights of working people to withdraw their labour? Is the view that fraudulent bankers should be punished to be made freshly perceptible so that it may become an object of critique?¹⁷³

On the one hand, this is a peculiarly conservative argument for him to be making. That we take something for granted as a good idea should not shield it from being called into question.¹⁷⁴ Calling something into question is not only done for the sake of knocking it down; it can also be done for the purpose of recalling us to why we cherish or value it. If punishing fraudulent bankers is a good idea, but we forget why we do it, then we risk losing sight of its being a good idea, and so no longer doing it.¹⁷⁵ It is not enough that something is routine. If we do not pose questions to ourselves about why we take for granted what we do, then we risk not being able to provide adequate answers for those questions; and if we cannot adequately answer the question of why we do what we do, then we may eventually realise that there is no reason for which we do it – and if there is no

¹⁷³ See Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (Yale, 2013), pp. 91-3.

¹⁷⁴ The earlier Eagleton was keener on demanding justifications: see his *The Function of Criticism* (Verso, 2005 [first published 1984]), pp. 88-9.

¹⁷⁵ For the relevance of the Kierkegaardian theme of 'repetition' to Gadamer, see Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other* (SUNY, 1999).

reason for doing something, and there is some kind of reason against it (in light of which it has become questionable), why are we doing it? But on the other hand, there is a well-founded suspicion that undergirds this line of criticism. As we touched on in Ch. 2, and will return to in Ch. 5, Gadamer's privileging of disruptive experiences leads him to lose sight both of the importance of non-disruptive experiences, and of the potentially destructive nature of disruptive experiences.

What is the significance of hermeneutical experience? Ordinary experience, we said, occurs in light of my various anticipations regarding a situation; when an experience does not unfold in accordance with my expectations, Gadamer refers to it as a 'genuine' experience. As we saw, this concept itself needs to be refined, so as to distinguish between those experiences that simply serve to correct my understanding of something (as when my anticipations are let down when I am trying to make something), and those experiences that reach to my fundamental concerns and serve to call them into question. As we saw with Gadamer's discussion of questions, questions serve to open phenomena up and make them indeterminate, to let us see them in the light of various possibilities.

Hermeneutical experience (as we discussed above) is a subspecies of this kind of experience: it is the genuine experience that occurs through being addressed by someone. The central feature of this experience is that my aim is *not* to develop some kind of predictive theory of the other, or of human nature in general. We do, of course, want to understand others, and part of this means having a reasonable idea of what they are likely to act and the kind of thing they are likely to say. But this cannot be our core aim; we have missed something important if we are to treat them only as an object to be understood. One of the dangers in treating others in this way is that we may come to suppose that we understand what they want to say better than they do, which absolves us of trying to actually listen when they speak. This serves to insulate our own point of view, since if we are not listening, we will not be open to question. Listening to an other means allowing what they say to call my point of view into question. As we saw in the discussion of questions, it is only when something is called into question that it can be allowed to show itself again from behind the veneer of

accepted opinion behind which it has sunk. More fundamentally, as we saw in the discussion of Levinas, others can call into question not only this or that thing but my whole way of life and my highest priorities. On Gadamer's account, the hermeneutical experience of the tradition does something similar; for the tradition is not only the source of prejudices, but is also capable of calling those prejudices into question – since the tradition is not unitary, and many of our prejudices are not shared by Plato. Indeed, this is precisely how the tradition features in Gadamer's account of genuine experience: a source of challenge that calls my prejudices into question.

This can be put another way. Behind hermeneutical experience, whether it addresses our fundamental convictions or corrects our previous view, is the insight that *to understand the other is to change the self*. For Gadamer, to understand something requires that I allow it to be different from how I think it is (which is to say, to allow it to call my prejudices into question), and then to allow my understanding to shape itself to what I am trying to understand. It is this imitative, mimetic quality of the understanding that allows me to understand anything at all; and it is when the understanding becomes sclerotic and inflexible, when it loses this imitative capacity, that I become unable to make sense of what is other than me. The imitative capacity of the understanding is evident to anyone who has asked themselves what advice their parents are likely to give them on some issue: on the basis of one's understanding of them, one's imagination can imitate them and suggest things that would not otherwise occur to one.

This connection between imitation and transformation is, in fact, a view that in some sense Gadamer shares with Plato – it is just that Plato is more suspicious of it. In the discussion of poetry and drama in the *Republic*, Socrates worries that allowing the Guardians to play the parts of characters who lack the virtues (or are otherwise unworthy of imitation) will ultimately be bad for them: to imitate what is not the self is to change the self, and so the Guardians should only play characters worthy of them. Gadamer lacks the worry that the self will be harmed (on the contrary, he thinks the effects are beneficial), but he agrees that when the understanding mimics something (those are not his terms) the self is changed.

The experience of art is also a hermeneutical experience for Gadamer, as one can see in his essay 'The Relevance of the Beautiful'. There, Gadamer works out an account of art by bringing into play three concepts: play, symbol and festival. These three concepts can be understood in relation to a deeper concept, which Gadamer does not explicitly employ in order to link them, but which is present throughout his essay: the concept of the overwhelming. The experience of art, for Gadamer, is one that runs ahead of my attempt to make sense of it, and that overwhelms whatever prior understanding I had brought to bear on the artwork. This overwhelming is not purely passive, however; the experience of art is an activity in which I am a participant, called upon to gather together the elements of the artwork and relate them (RB 26-8). This activity is never quite adequate, and whatever is given in the artwork always seems to slip beyond what can be grasped: an artwork is always 'an intricate interplay of showing and concealing', the result of which is that it resists paraphrase and is, as Gadamer puts it, 'irreplaceable' (RB 33). The other, deeper way in which the experience of art is overwhelming is in its relation to our sense of time. This occurs through the artwork's demand to be understood in its own time: the poem has a rhythm which one has to find, just as the piece of music has its own pace (RB 43). But Gadamer insists that this is true not only of temporal arts but also of static ones. The painting demands that one tarry before it, breaking the flow of one's busy schedule, seeking understanding, which comes in its own time. All art has this temporal dimension:

When we dwell upon the work, there is no tedium involved, for the longer we allow ourselves, the more it displays its manifold riches to us. The essence of our temporal experience of art is in learning how to tarry in this way. And perhaps it is the only way that is granted to us finite beings to relate to what we call eternity. (RB 45)

The experience of art, then, is hermeneutical in two ways. The first we are familiar with from the preceding discussion: when we get caught up with an artwork, we come to recognise the way it surpasses our grasp, and thus come to recognise the inadequacy of our understanding. The second way is new: the

experience of art changes our temporal orientation – for as long as we tarry before it. Despite its interest, however, Gadamer’s discussion of art and time would lead us too far afield for our present purposes, and so we must content ourselves with merely noting it.¹⁷⁶

2. *Phronesis*: Hermeneutical Virtue

There is something resembling dialectic in hermeneutic experience: an activity of the thing itself, an action that [...] is a passion, an understanding, an event that happens to one. (TM 460)

For Gadamer, truth is closely bound up with his concept of experience: for him, the event of truth is the rupture of the veneer of what I had supposed, the intrusion of something alien that asserts itself against what I had taken for granted.¹⁷⁷ But this does not simply happen; it is evident that most of us most of the time do not experience this – and a good thing, too, since it would be exhausting. Even apart from this, the event of truth does not simply occur – those cases in which it does occur without my looking for it are exceptions. Rather, it requires a particular kind of outlook, a particular orientation towards experience, in order to be encouraged.¹⁷⁸

This Gadamer describes as the ‘rigor’ of hermeneutical experience: ‘uninterrupted listening’:

A thing does not present itself to the hermeneutical experience without an effort special to it, namely that of “being negative toward itself”. A person who is trying to understand a text has to keep

¹⁷⁶ For discussion of Gadamer on art and time, see Vessey, ‘Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Contribution to a Theory of Time-Consciousness’; and Daniel Tate (2012), ‘In the Fullness of Time: Gadamer on the Temporal Dimension of the Work of Art’, *Research in Phenomenology*, 42.

¹⁷⁷ I note that this is very close to the goal of philosophy that Adorno sets up in ‘Why Still Philosophy’, collected in his *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 13. Adorno, of course, is thinking about this in terms of the distorting social forms of the actually existing world, while Gadamer is just thinking through understanding *as such*, without an eye to radical social critique.

¹⁷⁸ See also Bernet, ‘Gadamer on the Subject’s Participation in the Game of Truth’, pp. 804ff.

something at a distance – namely everything that suggests itself, on the basis of his own prejudices, as the meaning expected – as soon as it is rejected by the sense of the text itself. Even the experience of reversal (which happens unceasingly in talking, and which is the real experience of dialectic) has its equivalent here. Explicating the whole of meaning towards which understanding is directed forces us to make interpretive conjectures and to take them back again. The self-cancellation of the interpretation makes it possible for the thing itself – the meaning of the text – to assert itself. (TM 461)

The ‘activity and [...] effort [of thinking] consist in not interfering arbitrarily – latching onto this or that ready-made notion as it strikes one – with the immanent necessity of the thought’ (TM 459). If we fail to do this we wind up distorting the thing we are trying to understand. Our aim instead is to allow them to show themselves as they are, without distorting them. When we do not allow this to happen, we risk seeing everything in the light of our purposes and interests, and we distort and bend and do violence to appearances. In a later speech, ‘In Praise of Theory’, Gadamer relates this to the ideal of *theoria*: at its root, theory is ‘a looking away from oneself and looking out towards the other, disregarding oneself and listening to the other’ (PT 35). It is not bracketing out one’s point of view but ‘overcoming the illusions that constantly arise from one’s own ego [...] in order to see what is’ (PT 31).¹⁷⁹ That is to say, for Gadamer ‘theory’ is not mental model building (constructing ‘a theory’) but rather looking, trying to see what is other than oneself.

Theoria – seeing things as they are, not as one wills them – does not simply happen. Avoiding the distortion and damage that can be done to appearances by one’s will requires a virtue Gadamer terms *phronesis*.¹⁸⁰ The virtue of *phronesis* has a long history – so what precisely does it mean to Gadamer, and how does it

¹⁷⁹ Heidegger makes the same point in *Being and Time* (§32), where he writes that we have to constantly resist fancies and popular opinions when working out an interpretation.

¹⁸⁰ For its history in Gadamer’s development, and an argument that it is *the* fundamental concept for that development, see Ricardo Dottori (2009), ‘The Concept of Phronesis by Aristotle and the Beginning of Hermeneutic Philosophy’, *Ethics & Politics*, XI, 1, pp. 301-310. For a discussion of the relation between Gadamer and Heidegger on *phronesis*, see Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics* (SUNY, 1998), Ch. 1.

fit within the broader project of *Truth and Method*? The concept appears most prominently in the chapter on Aristotle's ethics ('The hermeneutic relevance of Aristotle', in Part II). There it provides a model for elucidating the *placed* nature of hermeneutic thinking: for Aristotle, *phronesis* is that capacity to apprehend what the good is in *this* situation – it is a kind of intuitive grasp that goes beyond mere rule-following, and instead allows one to see how the elements of the situation relate to each other to create a range of possibilities; for Gadamer, it is a matter of grasping the 'meaning and significance' of the text as it speaks to me in *this* situation (TM 321). The theme Gadamer emphasises is that of *self-knowledge*: where the end of *techné* is external to my action, *phronesis* is concerned with acting well – part of what *phronesis* produces is myself (TM 314).

In his later book, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, Gadamer claims that while Aristotle's use of the concept of *phronesis* is concerned with practical affairs (and so is a thoroughly normal use of the word), Plato expands its usage to the extent that he uses it as a synonym for dialectic – a 'real reasonableness' employed in the pursuit of 'real justification' as opposed to 'self-justification' and the insistence on one's own view (IG 37-9). This proximity of *phronesis* to dialectic is also present in *Truth and Method*, when in Part III Gadamer discusses his debts to Hegel: 'thinking means unfolding what consistently follows from the subject matter itself', and 'it is part of this process to suppress ideas "that tend to insinuate themselves" and to insist on the logic of the thought' – all of which is dialectic (TM 459).

Phronesis, then, has two aspects: it is both listening to the other such that I understand what they are saying as of relevance to *me* (this is what Gadamer calls 'application'), and my active resistance to my own fancies. These cannot be finally separated from each other, since listening properly means taking the other to be addressing me, and resisting the temptation to suppose I know better. I have to bracket my interests – and not assume things are as I assume they are, or as I wish them to be – if I am to see things as they actually are. This concern with allowing the thing to show itself as prior to grasping it – even grasping it conceptually – goes all the way back to Gadamer's first book, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*. In that book, it was Gadamer's view that this is one of the major differences between Plato and Aristotle: where Plato seeks to lay bare the

phenomena, Aristotle seeks to grasp them and render them on a conceptual plane. There he writes:

Crucial to the interpretation of the *Philebus* [...] is the fact that the *problem* of ethics is really seen here, but is not taken hold of, in itself, as a task. The fact that the *Philebus's* position in regard to ontology is identical with the general Platonic position that we call the doctrine of the Forms cannot conceal the distinctive concentration of the *Philebus's* inquiry on the ethical problem - that is, on the good in *human* life. The goal, after all, is to argue from the general ontological idea of the good precisely to the good of actual human existence. (PDE 1-2)

We have, in this passage, two themes that will prove essential for the later Gadamer. The first is the distinction between 'seeing' a problem and 'taking hold of' it. The other is that Gadamer can be seen to be already opposing Aristotle's interpretation (and so also his criticism) of the Idea of the Good: rather than being of no use to us, the good in human life is derived explicitly from an ontological conception of the Good.¹⁸¹ It is with the former that we will concern ourselves.

What does the distinction between 'seeing' and 'taking hold of' consist in? Immediately we can see that these are two importantly different modes of engaging with something: on the one hand, we can just look at something and contemplate it as it is (the theoretical attitude); on the other, we can look at something with a view to how it will be useful to us (the practical attitude). This is also the root of Heidegger's distinction between 'present-at-hand' and 'ready-to-hand',¹⁸² but there is something more fundamental going on: we can apply Gadamer's distinction *within* the theoretical attitude itself, and this is what he does. Within the theoretical attitude, we can distinguish between the kind of clearing activity that we engage in in order to let the thing apprehended show

¹⁸¹ For Aristotle's criticism of the Idea of the Good, see NE 1096^b32 f.: 'It is hard, too, to see how a weaver or a carpenter will be benefited in regard to his own craft by knowing this "good itself".'

¹⁸² Being and Time, §69(b)

itself as it is (the clearing away of misleading biases - or 'prejudices', to use Gadamer's later terminology) and the conceptualising activity by which we categorise the phenomenon and bring it within the grasp of the understanding. These two activities are clearly related, but it is in terms of the distinction between them that Gadamer understands the difference between Plato (who sees) and Aristotle (who grasps).

Thus Plato is not understood as writing treatises in dialogue form, or as necessarily offering conceptual arguments for his position, but rather as always engaged in a protreptical process by which the reader is invited to share in the inquiry itself. As a general view this is not particularly contentious;¹⁸³ however, Gadamer's manner of elaborating it is more unusual. Understood in terms of the distinction just elaborated, Plato is attempting to lay bare the thing under discussion so that it can be seen, rather than to develop it conceptually so that it can be grasped. With regard to ethics, where Aristotle elaborates the good life conceptually (albeit with the qualification that there are limits to the precision attainable by ethics as an inquiry), Plato's dialogues are fundamentally different because he does not claim to take possession (even partially), but always points only to the possibility of a grasp that always slips away (PDE 6-7).

The firsthand discovery that Plato is more than what Aristotle and conceptual analysis can extract from him cannot itself be conveyed secondhand. It stands at the limit of all Plato interpretation, just as there stands, at the limit of all conceptual work in philosophy, the realisation that all interpretation makes its object univocal and, by providing access to it, necessarily also obstructs access to it. (PDE 8)

On the preceding page, Gadamer had contrasted the richness of lived experience with the 'flattened' version that 'enters into' the concept. This can be elaborated

¹⁸³ As an example chosen almost at random, consider Julia Annas: 'Writing [dialogues] is not just for literary effect; the dialogue form formally distances Plato from the views of anyone in the dialogue, and this forces the reader to think for herself what positions are being discussed, and what the upshot is, rather than accepting what is said on Plato's example.' (*Ancient Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* [Oxford, 2000], p. 5)

in terms of the distinction between 'seeing' and 'grasping', and will also afford us the opportunity to elaborate the significance of this distinction.

Gadamer's basic outlook is that we are finite subjects that encounter a world that is more or less opaque to us, as we are more or less opaque to ourselves. Our intellectual activity takes place as we are already 'under way': we do not begin from nothing, but rather already have some kind of understanding of ourselves and the world. In attempting to better understand something, we elaborate the concept by which we grasp it, adding details and making it more complex, with the intended end goal being the possession of a concept that precisely matches the thing: when our understanding is precisely adequate to the phenomenon.

However, if this way of understanding operates solely by itself, then it can occur that concern for our concepts triumphs over a vision of the thing understood. We become concerned with adjusting our concepts in order to cope with the phenomenon, rather than returning to fundamental questions about what the thing *is*. To borrow a popular image, we continuously add epicycles rather than looking at the thing afresh. (Recall Gadamer's praise of theory as *looking*.)

But Gadamer goes further than this. For it could be said, following all of this, that the aim of intellectual activity is to progressively work through conceptions of things, throwing out unworkable ones until we finally arrive at an understanding that is totally adequate to the phenomena. This is the goal of (among others) Hegel, the Thomistic tradition, and probably also Aristotle himself (we can call this the 'progressive' view). On the other hand, by claiming that our conceptual access to things *also blocks access to them*, Gadamer is closing the possibility of a final and adequate conception of things.

If this is correct, then the distinction between 'seeing' and 'grasping' takes on greater significance. For, on the 'progressive' view, we could in principle reach a point at which our grasp of the phenomena is such that we no longer need to 'see'.¹⁸⁴ On Gadamer's view, 'seeing' is something we can never do without; the richness of lived experience is not conceptually exhaustible. Further, the concern with perfecting our concepts appears as a turn inwards: we become concerned

¹⁸⁴ However, for a slightly contrasting perspective, see Alasdair MacIntyre's 'On Not Having the Last Word' in Malpas et al. (eds.), *Gadamer's Century*.

with the self-enjoyment of refining our concept over attending to the thing itself; and, as we saw with Gadamer's analysis of *Erfahrung*, this means losing that openness to new experience.

Thus the significance of Plato's approach is that he allows us to see something of the richness of the thing under consideration. He is not espousing doctrine, or trying to synthesise rival views, but instead is trying to shape our view of the *Sache* (PDE 11). (This is not to say that Plato's view of the world is somehow a neutral one, however; even at this early stage, Gadamer speaks of the 'fore-conception' that links Plato, Aristotle and the Greeks together [PDE 12].) Rather, Gadamer says, 'the dialogues are comprehended in their own intention only when one understands them as serving to lead the reader toward the existential ideal of the philosopher: toward life in pure theory' (PDE 2). 'Theory': to be understood not as the work of conceptualisation, but in connection with its Greek root, which means 'to look'.

In the primacy of 'seeing' over 'grasping' we can already see Gadamer's later prizing of genuine experience. For the genuine experience is precisely that experience that calls me afresh to the phenomena, that jolts me out of my comfortable conceptualisations. The activity of *phronesis* is the seeking after 'seeing', seeking after genuine experience. To develop the virtue of *phronesis* is to become like the 'experienced man' Gadamer describes in the chapter on *Erfahrung*; it is to recognise one's limits, which is to say it is to recognise the way in which the horizon one brings with oneself serves as the backdrop against which everything appears to me – it is to actively allow what appears to me, what is addressed to me, to call this horizon into question, such that a productive engagement can be had with it.

This is clearly related to the discussion of dialectic that occurs towards the end of *Truth and Method*.

Dialectic is truly experienced when thought undergoes the incomprehensible reversal into its opposite. The very act of holding onto what consistently follows in the thought leads to this surprising movement of the reversal – as when, for example, a person seeking

justice discovers that adhering strictly to the idea of justice becomes “abstract” and proves to be the greatest injustice (*summum ius summa iniuria*). (TM 463)

The virtue of *phronesis*, then, involves holding on and following through this kind of dialectical reversal. We note that the example of serving justice by not being a hard-line enforcer of justice comes from Aristotle – it is the virtue of *epieikeia*, which is the complement to the virtue of justice (*dikaiosune*): since abstract laws cannot account for every case, sometimes exceptions need to be made in particular cases in order to uphold the aim and spirit of the law (i.e. the promotion of justice). Of course, as we have observed a number of times, Gadamer does not wish to follow Hegel in thinking that these reversals that thought undergoes in dialectic lead to some final resting place; but we can recognise the way these reversals return our attention to the thing in question, and require us to account for it anew: we thought we knew what justice was, but now we see that we did not. Our concepts are more unruly than we know.

One of the striking features of *phronesis*, as related to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, is how *un*-Hegelian it is. For Hegel, the alienation that thought undergoes in dialectic is finally resolved in a final stage of absolute knowing; but Gadamer, in rejecting this end, makes of *phronesis* and the reversals of dialectic the *endless pursuit of alienation*. This is, in fact, the upshot of his privileging of *Erfahrung* as genuine experience, of his claim that ‘only an experience that thwarts an expectation is worthy of the name’. If a genuine experience is one in which I realise the way in which the thing exceeds my understanding of it, and *phronesis* is the virtue of being open to genuine experience, then *phronesis* is the virtue of the perpetual pursuit of the beyond, that which exceeds my horizon, a virtue of the constant minding of the limited nature of my horizon.

Reading Gadamer in this way, with genuine experience and *phronesis* at the centre of his account, runs directly counter to the kind of reading one finds in Robert Bernasconi, for example.¹⁸⁵ Bernasconi thinks that Gadamer’s hermeneutics as a theory cannot accommodate his occasional remarks on the

¹⁸⁵ ‘“You don’t know what I’m talking about”: Alterity and the Hermeneutical Ideal’, in Lawrence Schmidt (ed.), *The Specter of Relativism* (Northwestern, 1995).

otherness of the other. This is because Gadamer's theory emphasises too heavily the role of coming to an agreement (pp. 186-7), which is related to his privileging philosophical conversation at the expense of other forms of conversation (pp. 190-1). He sums up his critique by saying that he is charging Gadamer with 'not being Levinas'.¹⁸⁶

He leverages this argument by considering the phrase 'You don't know what I'm talking about'. The idea is that this phrase is not necessarily uttered with the aim of reaching agreement: when said by the victim of oppression, it implies 'you ought to change' while also acknowledging 'the change won't – in a sense, can't – take place' (p. 192). This occurs especially when what is under discussion is not some third thing but rather the experience of one of the participants in the conversation (or, perhaps, the focus of the discussion is the *difference* between the experiences of the two participants). It points, in other words, to the limits of the oppressor's experience, and to the way that, since the experience of the oppressed is not open to them, they cannot ever understand it and – lacking understanding – will never change to accommodate it.

However, Gadamer's discussion of authority and understanding is helpful here. To take somebody as an authority, Gadamer says, is not an 'abdication of reason' but an acknowledgement of their superior judgement or insight into some topic (TM 281). We can easily extend this to the notion that others have experiences that we might have no access to or awareness of. A socially privileged group may be unaware of the difficulties faced by those who are at the social margins, just as those who are discriminated in favour of will not always be aware of the difficulties faced by those who are discriminated against.

But this kind of concern that one group of people may not understand the experiences of another group is not limited to the kinds of cases Bernasconi refers to. It was also central Wilfred Owen's project as a war poet: to tell the truth about the experience of the soldiers. In a number of poems, Owen takes aim at some un-truth about that experience (a lie, a romanticisation, etc.) peddled back in England: in 'Dulce et decorum est' he takes aim at Horace's line that 'it is sweet and meet to die for one's country' (in the translation Owen provides in a

¹⁸⁶ See n. 26 to Bernasconi's essay.

letter to his mother), and those spreading that sentiment at home.¹⁸⁷ This poem's centre of gravity is the horror of gas warfare, and it describes watching another soldier die 'guttering, choking, drowning' during a gas attack; the experience has marked the speaker to such an extent he still sees it in his dreams. The idea of the dream allows Owen to set up a contrast between the experience that marks a soldier so deeply he keeps reliving it in his dreams, and the non-soldier back in England who has been propagating the lies about that experience, who could only live that experience in their imagination, but probably won't. The final stanza of the poem is as follows:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.¹⁸⁸

Owen's lines express doubts that are strikingly similar to Bernasconi's: '*if* in some smothering dreams you too *could* pace': the grammar has the effect of distancing that possibility, and seems to imply 'but you *can't* or *won't*'. And yet, historically, this is an argument that Owen has more or less won: we now, when we think of the First World War, think of the horrors of trench warfare and the senseless waste of human lives. In other words, it is misery we think of, not glory; and this is, in part, because we belong to the effective-history (to employ one of Gadamer's terms) of Owen's poem. The effectiveness of the poem lies in

¹⁸⁷ See Stallworthy's notes to the poem in Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 2 vols. (Chatto & Windus, 2013), 1:140-1.

¹⁸⁸ *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 1:140.

the way it encourages one to imagine oneself into the position of the soldiers, 'drunk with fatigue', 'coughing like hags', bootless and 'blood-shod', too tired even to care about the shells falling nearby; to imagine helplessly watching one's friend die horribly in a gas attack; and to imagine pacing behind a wagon witnessing their final death-spasms. By the time you get to the final Latin tag, it has become utterly and obviously false – a lie told by those who do not have to fight. While the poem expresses doubts about the ability or willingness of others to imagine the soldiers' experience, it is itself a propaedeutic to exactly that act of imagination.

Returning to Bernasconi, while we ought, then, to be suspicious of the claim of a privileged group to simply speak on behalf of the dispossessed, Owen's poem and its effective history give us reason to believe that Bernasconi is unduly pessimistic. It does not follow that the privileged can never come to understand the experiences of the dispossessed, or that they can never come to recognise the way their own experiences do not furnish them with the adequate categories for understanding that experience. This is to say: they can accept the testimony of others as authoritative. Accepting the testimony of someone else as authoritative, especially when it goes against what I had presumed, is an event of understanding in the fundamental, disruptive sense that is so important to Gadamer. This does not mean accepting that testimony in a dogmatic or authoritarian way; one can still ask critical questions, ask for elaborations, and so on: what is required is the acknowledgment that my experience does not by itself furnish me with the resources to understand theirs – it is only through dialogue and a capacity for imagination that I can approach an understanding. All of this requires an openness that is the hallmark of *phronesis*.

Monica Vilhauer makes some parallel objections to Bernasconi's argument, although she is more concerned by it than I am.¹⁸⁹ Vilhauer is concerned that, on Gadamer's model of understanding, there is a temptation to 'fool ourselves into believing that we ever achieve a kind of "complete" understanding with the Other where nothing is left out or ignored' (p. 91). But, as we can see from the foregoing, this is simply not an issue. While Gadamer does have a drive towards agreement, it is not a drive to make the other agree with me but a drive towards

¹⁸⁹ Gadamer's *Ethics of Play* (Lexington, 2010), pp. 89ff., esp. p. 91.

my agreement with them. The highest hermeneutical virtue is an openness toward what the other says, such that I take what they say as a direct challenge to my point of view. This openness is called *phronesis*. One of the central propositions of Gadamer's hermeneutics is the claim that 'Openness to the other [...] involves recognising that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so' (TM 355). *Pace* Bernasconi, Gadamer cedes dialogical priority to the other over the self. *Pace* Vilhauer, there is no temptation to collapse the otherness of the other to my self; if anything, the temptation runs in something like the opposite direction.

This gives us a perspective from which to view Derrida's objection to Gadamer, voiced during their 'debate'.¹⁹⁰ Derrida asks of Gadamer's insistence on a fundamental 'good will to understand':

Doesn't this unconditional axiom nevertheless presuppose that the *will* is the form of that unconditionality, its last resort, its ultimate determination? What is the will if, as Kant says, nothing is absolutely good except the good will? Would not this determination belong to what Heidegger has rightly called "the determination of the being of beings as will, or willing subjectivity"? Does this way of speaking, in its very necessity, belong to a particular epoch, namely, that of a metaphysics of the will?¹⁹¹

The basic idea lurking behind these questions is that if the 'good will to understand' is a form of *willing*, then it is too invested in trying to determine the world in one way or the other for it to make space for the way the other it is supposedly trying to 'understand' is other to how it wills the world to be. This is to say: the will is not a neutral observer, for it views the world through the lens of what it wants to bring about. As Josef Simon has elaborated the issue,¹⁹² the 'good will to understand' must be caught in an antinomy: on the one hand, what

¹⁹⁰ For materials concerning this debate, see *Dialogue & Deconstruction*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder & Richard E. Palmer (SUNY, 1989).

¹⁹¹ *Dialogue & Deconstruction*, pp. 52-3.

¹⁹² 'Good Will to Understand and the Will to Power', trans. Richard Palmer, collected in *Dialogue & Deconstruction*.

it wills is to understand the other, which means to conform itself to what is other; on the other, as the will it cannot help but try to determine its object in accordance with its aim. Thus, the will to understand must necessarily find itself, “against its intentions” (so to speak), engaged in subterfuge in order to bring the other’s position into agreement with mine – and Gadamer’s position, as a metaphysics of the will, cannot acknowledge that ‘the attempt to take seriously the other’s position, for example in answering to the “subtleties” if his or her expression, is [...] only a more elegant method of taking people in, after which they are supposed ultimately to agree with one’s point’.¹⁹³ When Gadamer in his response to Derrida echoes the Socratic claim that the the good will to understand means strengthening the other’s argument and being glad to be refuted,¹⁹⁴ for Simon this is just another subterfuge.¹⁹⁵

But is it? For Derrida’s objection hinges on a simplistic conception of the will: the will seeks to affect the world, but that it can be self-reflexive does not seem to have occurred to him (or to Simon). Even Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’, which lurks in the background of the objection, has this self-reflexive character: the ‘ascetic priest’ of the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morality* is the person who encourages the slaves to turn their frustrated wills against themselves, and in practising asceticism – which is to say, turning their wills against themselves, holding their own desires in check – they are able to attain that feeling of power and resistance overcome that is the satisfaction of the will. And it is precisely this capacity to hold one’s interpretive desires in check that Gadamer terms *phronesis*. Rather than being deployed against the other, the good will to understand is a self-reflexive form of the will, directed towards thwarting one’s attempts to determine what the other is saying for them. This is why Gadamer insists on the good will being the equivalent of Plato’s *eumeneis elenchoi*, “strengthening the arguments”.¹⁹⁶ It is a constant danger that the will to understand will fail, and that one will instead assimilate the other’s perspective to one’s own, or wind up employing argumentative subtleties in order to ensure

¹⁹³ ‘Good Will to Understand’, p. 166.

¹⁹⁴ *Dialogue & Deconstruction*, p. 55.

¹⁹⁵ ‘Good Will to Understand’, p. 166.

¹⁹⁶ *Dialogue & Deconstruction*, p. 55.

one's own argument is the winning one – but this is precisely the failure of the will to understand, and the reason why understanding is a constant task.¹⁹⁷

3. Gadamer on Celan

Let us round out our discussion of Gadamer on genuine experience by considering his relation to the poems of Paul Celan. Gadamer had a well-known interest in Celan's poetry: he produced a short book on Celan's *Breath-crystal* (*Atemkristall*) cycle, of which he also produced a revised edition a decade later, and a couple of other essays.¹⁹⁸ We will focus on two central themes: the connection between genuine experience and language; and Gadamer's seeming aversion to the singularity and particularity of the other, which I will argue has deep roots in his thought.

Now is the moment to draw together two important threads, and to explore the connection between genuine experience and what we have called the linguisticity of experience. In an essay written during the same decade in which Gadamer was working on *Truth and Method*, he refers to the need to 'break through that which controls our entire thinking and knowing like a closed and impermeable layer of smoothed-over opinions'.¹⁹⁹ The idea is this: our supposing that we already know how something is, already being able to speak about it, having various phrases and expressions ready to hand to be deployed whenever the topic comes up, prevents us from properly experiencing it: the moment we come to reflect on it or try to articulate what it was like, we can subsume it to ready-made categories and express it with ready-made phrases that serve to deaden and render the experience inoperative.

Poetry, for Gadamer, is one of the highest forms of resistance to this tendency – for both the poet, and for the reader. For the poet, the need to delve deeper, to

¹⁹⁷ *Dialogue & Deconstruction*, p. 57.

¹⁹⁸ These have been gathered and translated into English in the volume *Gadamer on Celan* [GC]; there is also a discussion of Celan and Heidegger in *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, pp. 53-4.

¹⁹⁹ 'What is truth?' (originally 1957), translated by Wachterhauser and collected in Wachterhauser, *Hermeneutics and Truth*, p. 42.

find the *right* words, demands that they let the experience work on them in order to bring it into language. In his Celan book, Gadamer refers to the '*Erfahrung* [which we have been rendering as 'genuine experience'] of writing poetry' (GC 73). For the reader, too, the encounter with the poem, in which one discovers a new apt expression, or a startling image, or a surprising conjunction, or a puzzling phrase that lodges itself in one's memory – in all of these, the encounter with the poem is a genuine experience.

In Gadamer's commentary on the *Breath-crystal* cycle, he finds a number of poems that express the poet's relation to language. In the first poem he finds the need of the poet for solitude and silence, and then the relation to language becomes explicit in the second poem (GC 75-8):

Von ungeträumtem geätzt,
wirft das schlaflos durchwanderte Brotland
den Lebensberg auf.

Aus seiner Krume
knetest du neu unsre Namen,
die ich, ein deinem
gleichendes
Aug an jedem der Finger,
abtaste nach
einer Stelle, durch die ich
mich zu dir heranwachen kann,
die helle
Hungerkerze im Mund.

[By the undreamt etched,
the sleeplessly wandered-through breadland
casts up the life mountain.

From its crumb
you knead anew our names,

which I, an eye
similar
to yours on each finger
probe for
a place, through which I
can wake myself toward you,
the bright
hungercandle in mouth.]²⁰⁰

Gadamer finds in this poem an image for our lives: spent blindly moving like 'moles' through a land in which we must toil for our bread; driven by something 'undreamt' and unacknowledged that bites into us; and casting up, as we go, a 'life mountain' – our accumulated experience, which weighs down heavily upon us. It is from this life mountain that our 'names' – our selves – are kneaded anew by a 'you'. The 'I' of the poem, buried under this mountain, searches for a way 'wake' towards this 'you', a 'hungercandle' in his mouth. In this image, Gadamer sees the poet, digging through the mountain of words:

It means language, which is deposited over the entire experience of life like a covering burden. It is language which is probed, that is, tested for its permeability, for the possibility of maybe somewhere permitting the breakthrough into brightness. This seems to me to describe the destitution, as well as the distinction, of the poet. But is it the poet's alone? (GC 78)

The destitution of the poet, then, is the sense that language is a burden, that it cannot simply be trusted; the poet's distinction is to have recognised this, and to probe for a way through the untrustworthy surface of language. Insofar as we are all in the position of the poet – experiencing the world through the medium of a language that is both the possibility of experience and a burden – we all have a 'hungercandle' in our mouths, seeking the right word.

²⁰⁰ Translated by Pierre Joris in *Breathturn into Timestead* (FSG, 2014), p. 3.

The dual nature of language as both what makes experience possible, and that which burdens experience, comes through in Gadamer's discussion of the next poem in the cycle (GC 79-82):

In die Rillen
der Himmelsmünze im Türspalt
preßt du das Wort,
dem ich entrollte,
als ich mit bebenden Fäusten
das Dach über uns
abtrug, Schiefer um Schiefer,
Silbe um Silbe, dem Kupfer-
schimmer der Bettel-
schale dort oben
zulieb.

[Into the furrows
of the heavenscoin in the doorcrack
you press the word
from which I rolled,
when I with trembling fists
the roof over us
dismantled, slate for slate,
syllable for syllable, for the copper-
glimmer of the begging-
cup's sake up
there.]²⁰¹

The lines of most interest to us for our present purposes are the central ones: that 'I' 'rolled' from a word, and that 'I' sought to dismantle the 'roof over us' – a roof composed of 'syllables' – the roof of language under which we all live.

²⁰¹ Translated by Pierre Joris, *Breathturn into Timestead*, pp. 3-4.

Perhaps it is true for all of us that we each would prefer to dismantle the roof which offers us common protection by taking away the portal and prospect, in order to look into the open. Certainly more than anyone the poet says of himself here something that is perhaps true for everyone. The covering of words is like a roof over us. They secure the familiar. But insofar as they envelope us completely with familiarity, they inhibit any view of the unfamiliar. Syllable by syllable, that is, laboriously and tirelessly, the poet – or is it each of us? – seeks to dismantle what is covering. This “syllable by syllable” dismantling seems to correspond to what we encountered in the previous poem as the proving of names and the waking onto. Both poems appear to describe a desperate effort to strive for the brightness above. (GC 81)

This passage is of central importance for Gadamer’s conception of our relation to language. For language is both the shelter that enables us to live and to make sense of ourselves – and at the same time, *by the same features that make it a shelter*, it inhibits our view of what is unfamiliar and threatens to envelope us in familiarity. This threat drives us to try to dismantle the roof, in order to get to the brightness on the other side – a brightness that turns out to be disappointing: the mere gleam of a begging-cup. Theologically, Gadamer reads this as the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden god who is beyond our grasp even if we clear away what we think is obscuring our view. But the poem also describes the task of the poet: ‘to seek the true word, not the word which comes from the usual, protective roof of every day, but the one which arrives from beyond as if it were his true home. Therefore, the poet must dismantle the scaffolding of every day words syllable by syllable. He must fight against the ordinary, customary, obscuring, and levelling function of language in order to lay open a view of the glimmer above. That is poetry.’ (GC 82)

This need to fight against the ‘levelling function of language’ epitomises the connection between genuine experience and the linguisticity of experience. Gadamer’s insistence on the linguistic nature of experience is not a drive to assimilate all contradictory experience to the already-existing, tradition-derived language of the present, but rather is shot through with his ambivalence towards

language: on the one hand, what allows us to make sense of things and of ourselves; on the other hand, what threatens to reduce all difference to the familiar.

Now let us turn a critical eye on one peculiar feature of Gadamer's thought that shows through in his reading of Celan. What we will see is an aversion to the particular and the singular – to those things that mark out an individual as individual.

The central interpretive question Gadamer poses in his reading of the *Breath-crystal* cycle forms the title of his book: "Who am I and who are You?" One expects, on this basis, an interpretation that works out the I-You relation as it is present in these poems, but this anticipation is disrupted:²⁰² three-quarters of the way through, Gadamer seems to reject the question itself: 'We do not need to ask ourselves: Who am I and who are You? The poem will say 'yes' to every answer' (GC 118). In the 'Epilogue', he writes: 'And if one thinks about the question I raised in relation to the poem-cycle "Breath-crystal": Who am I and who are you? – does anybody really want to answer it? I must insist that the figure of this You [the immediate reference here is to the poem 'Flower' / 'Blume'] is itself, not any particular person, a beloved, or any other, even the Wholly Other' (GC 134). Frequently, 'I' turns out to be all of us;²⁰³ frequently, 'You' turns out to be 'I' engaged in self-address.²⁰⁴ But the point Gadamer wants to insist on is that reading in the poem a reference to any *particular* person would limit the sphere of the interpretation of the poem; the poem (in contrast to what he sees in the poem '(I know you...', which is bracketed) has a universal significance – it speaks to every reader of the poem regardless of any 'originally intended' references or meanings – that takes precedence to any particular reading.

²⁰² This may also be because of what Raymond Geuss calls Celan's 'moral indifferentism': he just wasn't interested in the I-Thou relation in the way Buber or Levinas were. See Geuss's essay 'Celan's *Meridian*', in his *Politics and the Imagination*, pp. 126-7.

²⁰³ For example: 'In speaking the lyrical word, the "I" that includes us all is so present that "I" is not even mentioned in the entire poem. This "I" that includes us all ...' (GC 90).

²⁰⁴ E.g. GC 99, 100-1, 113-4, 118.

This comes across with particular force in his reading of Celan's poem 'Tenebrae' in his essay 'Meaning and Concealment of Meaning in Paul Celan'.²⁰⁵ Here is the poem:

Tenebrae

Nah sind wir, Herr,
nahe und greifbar.

Gegriffen schon, Herr,
ineinander verkrallt, als wär
der Leib eines jeden von uns
dein Leib, Herr.

Bete, Herr,
bete zu uns,
wir sind nah.

Windschief gingen wir hin,
gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken
nach Mulde und Maar.

Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.

Es war Blut, es war,
was du vergossen, Herr.

Es glänzte.

Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr.
Augen und Munde stehn so offen und leer, Herr.
Wir haben getrunken, Herr.

²⁰⁵ GC 167-178.

Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr.

Bete, Herr.

Wir sind nah.

[We are near, Lord,
near and graspable.

Grasped already, Lord,
clawed into each other as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.

Wind-skewed we went there,
went there to bend
down to the trough, to the crater.

To be watered we went there, Lord.

It was blood, it was
what you shed, Lord.

It glistened.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Our eyes and our mouths are so open and empty, Lord.
We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.

We are near.]²⁰⁶

On Gadamer's reading, this is a kind of Christian existentialist poem: Christ on the cross (the title, 'Tenebrae', means 'darkness', but can refer specifically to the eclipse that coincided with Christ's death) is urged to pray to us, humankind, in his moment of suffering and death because we can sympathise with his condition in a way that his divine Father cannot. The poem calls our attention to the way we cannot escape our own deaths, and yet affirms us in this: when we go to be watered, we find blood – a symbol of death and mortality – but we drink it and find nourishment nonetheless. Gadamer thus finds universal significance in the poem – even if not all of us are Christians, the Christian message is itself supposed to be universal. Since we all need to face up to our own deaths, the poem is about all of us.²⁰⁷

But is it? To my ear, the most immediate feature of the poem is its eeriness: the bodies 'clawed into each other',²⁰⁸ the empty eyes and mouths, the drinking of the blood, the way the poem seems to be spoken in chorus ('we are near'). We happen to know that the expression 'clawed into each other' [*ineinander verkrallt*] comes from a book Celan had read on the 'Final Solution': there it described the positions of the bodies of the dead in the gas chambers.²⁰⁹ Gadamer is right to stress that one should not read a poem merely as an enigma to be unlocked by reference to biography of its author – the poem must speak for itself. But biographical information can help to give us an orientation towards the poem – knowing the poet's general preoccupations especially so. So let us pose the question: Who is speaking here? Rather than Gadamer's universal humanity, let's suppose it is instead the ghosts of those dead in the gas chambers

²⁰⁶ I have lightly modified Hamburger's translation, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 3rd ed. (Anvil Press, 2007), p. 129.

²⁰⁷ In his essay on Gadamer's poetics that stands as an introduction to *Gadamer on Celan*, Gerald Bruns has suggested that Gadamer's reading of 'Tenebrae' is a partial, Christian reading of the poem that can always be contrasted with other readings (GC 34). But this seems to me too conciliatory: it is an attempt to make contradictory readings sit peacefully next to each other, rather than engage with the question of which better makes sense of the poem. Gadamer's reading is Christian, it is true – but it is existentialist *before* it is Christian (he reads it as about death first and the divine second), and it takes the poem as having the universal significance I have just described.

²⁰⁸ 'A tortured picture,' notes Jerry Glenn, *Paul Celan* (Twayne, 1973), p. 97.

²⁰⁹ See John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (Yale, 1995), p. 103.

(just as 'Todesfugue' / 'Deathfugue' is spoken by those in the concentration camps) – or, taking it one step further, their Furies. The Furies, in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, are chthonic entities that rise up to pursue Orestes after he has murdered his mother; they are the agents summoned forth by Clytemnestra's desire for vengeance. In Celan's poem, the Furies of those dead in the death camps have stumbled across a desolate landscape ('wind-skewed')²¹⁰ in pursuit of the god 'who, so they head, wanted all this, / who, so they heard, knew all this' (to borrow lines from another of his poems);²¹¹ like the chthonic Furies, 'there was earth inside them'.²¹² Drawing near, they urge Christ to pray to them – for forgiveness. Thirsty, they find the blood of Christ pooling on the ground, and drink it. They are clawed into each other, grotesquely maintaining the posture they were in at death, and they will soon get their claws into Christ's body.

But there is also bitter irony in the poem. For Christ came nearly two thousand years too early for these Furies to get their hands on him, and Christ was the only coming of the Lord in a form that could be grasped and clawed. Hölderlin's lines (of which the first two lines of 'Tenebrae' are an inversion) are partially right: whether or not God is near, he is difficult to grasp.²¹³ The desire of the Furies for vengeance is thus impotent. Short of a second coming, the encounter imagined by the poem can never take place.

If this is correct, then the poem is not immediately about all of us at all. If it has universal significance, it is in its posing the question about how we are to deal with a desire for vengeance against the divine when the divine seems to be absent. This may not in the end be the right reading,²¹⁴ but I have followed Gadamer's injunction to say what one sees in the poem. What strikes me as implausible about Gadamer's reading is not only its universality, but that it

²¹⁰ Felstiner hears in this line an evocation of 'the terrain where *Einsatzkommandos* did their job': Paul Celan, p. 104.

²¹¹ 'There was earth inside them', trans. Hamburger, *Poems of Paul Celan*, p. 175.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ From his hymn 'Patmos': 'Nah ist / und schwer zu fassen der Gott': 'Near / and hard to grasp is God'. For the relation of 'Tenebrae' to 'Patmos' see Glenn, p. 97 and Felstiner, p. 102.

²¹⁴ For some alternative readings, see Glenn, *Paul Celan*, pp. 96-99 and Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, pp. 101-105.

passes over that eeriness I have made central, and that he makes the poem seem far more pious than I would expect from Celan.²¹⁵

But there is something instructive in Gadamer's immediate insistence on the universality of the poem: as we saw in Gadamer's account of genuine experience, what it teaches us is not any particular thing but knowledge of a universal: our human finitude. This is what seems to lie behind his desire not to read the poem as containing particular references: it must, in his view, speak to the reader without the need for 'specialist' knowledge.²¹⁶ But this seems to run counter to Celan's injunction that the poem should be mindful of its dates.²¹⁷ The concept of the 'meridian' that Celan sets out in his *Meridian* speech is deeply bound up with particularity, as has been well argued by Raymond Geuss.²¹⁸ A meridian is a line that runs north-south on the Earth, at every point along which the sun stands at its highest point simultaneously. In many of Celan's poems, a number of particular historical occasions are brought together on one 'meridian' such that they are grasped in their relation to one another. These historical events often speak to the utopian impulse – the desire for a world without injustice – and the frustration of that desire.²¹⁹ Thus in the poem 'You lie' / 'Du liegst', the executions of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg are brought together with the meathooks on which the conspirators against Hitler were hung nearly three decades later, together with apples on stakes and Christmas gifts and a luxury hotel.²²⁰ In Gadamer's discussion of this poem,²²¹ he acknowledges the need for

²¹⁵ This is, after all, the man who said to Nelly Sachs: 'I hope to be able to blaspheme until the end.' See *Paul Celan / Nelly Sachs: Correspondence* (Sheep Meadow Press, 1995), p. 26.

²¹⁶ This is a recurring theme in *Who Am I and Who Are You?* but see especially pp. 134-147 & 149-153. In his introduction to the volume, Bruns glosses this by quoting Derrida to the effect that Celan's poetry addresses us even if we don't understand a single allusion or reference, and goes on to say that 'one cannot respond to this address by supplying it with special information' (GC 29): this is true, and Celan's poetry would be uninteresting if it merely consisted of cryptic crosswords the answers to which were historic dates, but it ignores the way the demand of Celan's poems is often that we then try to find out, through research, 'what the poem knows' (in Gadamer's expression). As Geuss formulates it, Celan's poetics demands of the poet that they find 'dated experiences that deserve to enter into our utopian memory, for better or for worse, and to locate them on their meridian' ('Celan's *Meridian*', p. 137).

²¹⁷ 'Perhaps we may say that every poem has its "20th of January" inscribed? Perhaps what's new for poems written today is just this: that here the attempt is clearest to remain mindful of such dates? [...] Yet the poem does speak! It remains mindful of its dates, yet – it speaks.' *The Meridian*, translated by John Felstiner, in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, p. 408.

²¹⁸ See 'Celan's *Meridian*', esp. pp. 128-37. The following discussion draws on this article.

²¹⁹ 'Celan's *Meridian*', pp. 130ff.

²²⁰ See Szondi's discussion of this poem in 'Eden', collected in his *Celan Studies*, trans. Susan Bernofsky and Harvey Mendelsohn (Stanford, 2003).

knowledge of specific dates and events, since this is what the poem itself knows. He thus arrives at what seems to me the right reading of the poem: the injunction to see the way all of these contradictory elements can be in such close proximity to each other, such that a building that was used to hold political prisoners awaiting execution can later be a luxury hotel (as in the case of the hotel Eden). But while the inscription of particular dates seems to me central to Celan's poetics, for Gadamer it is a side issue: what matters is the way the poem speaks to the reader – the need for specific dates is an aberration, perhaps confined to only a few poems (see particularly GC 143).²²²

The issue is not confined only to Celan's poems. Consider, for another example, Wilfred Owen's poem 'Futility':

Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now,
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds –
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
– O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?²²³

²²¹ GC 137-144.

²²² It is interesting that, when writing without his philosophical hat on, Gadamer reads Celan's poem 'Todtnauberg' in straightforwardly biographical terms: see *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, trans. Robert Sullivan (MIT Press, 1985), p. 53.

²²³ *The Collected Poems and Fragments*, p. 158.

What, to ask Gadamer's question, does the poem know? Clearly it is about a dead man, and the futility of trying to wake him. There is also the suggestion that the man in question died from the cold ('until this morning and this snow'). But does the poem know it is a war poem? There is a reference to France, but that could point in any number of directions – perhaps, for instance, to a holiday. It is our knowledge of the context into which Owen was speaking and of his usual preoccupations that allow us to read it in a particular direction. Without being read as a war poem, 'Futility' is still a moving poem about death and the impossibility of recovering what is thus lost – and about the way this impossibility of recovering a loved one can call into question the whole point of existing in the first place. But the poem gains additional force by being read in the context of the 1914-18 war: in that context, it points to the bitter winters faced by the soldiers, who could die not just in fighting, but from exposure. The title thus comes to refer not only to the futility of trying to wake the dead, but also to the futility of the struggle of the soldiers to stay warm, to live longer. We are guided in reading the poem this way by our knowledge of Owen's particular preoccupations; but it is precisely those preoccupations that Gadamer is averse to.

Now, Gadamer's method is difficult to pin down. As with his hermeneutics generally, at one level he wants to insist that all he is doing is unpacking how readers do actually engage with the text. But there is something deeper going on. Gadamer would, I think, agree with this poem of Celan's that sets out the way the meaning of a poem emerges *between* reader and text:

Mit wechselndem Schlüssel
schließt du das Haus auf, darin
der Schnee des Verschwiegenen treibt.
Je nach dem Blut, das dir quillt
aus Aug oder Mund oder Ohr,
wechselt dein Schlüssel.

Wechselt dein Schlüssel, wechselt das Wort,
das treiben darf mit den Flocken.

Je nach dem Wind, der dich fortstößt,
ballt um das Wort such der Schnee.

[With a variable key
you unlock the house in which
drifts the snow of that left unspoken.
Always what key you choose
depends on the blood that spurts
from your eye or your mouth or your ear.

You vary the key, you vary the word
that is free to drift with the flakes.
What snowball will form round the word
depends on the wind that rebuffs you.]²²⁴

A whole hermeneutics of reading could be unpacked from this poem. The snowball – the meaning that emerges from a poem – forms in the last lines. First a key must be chosen to ‘unlock’ the unspoken words that surround the poem, those words that will form the context out of which the meaning can form. Which key gets selected is not an entirely free choice, but rather one that is rooted in our needs, as the image of spurting blood testifies. The key, once chosen, is not simply held rigid, however: as the second stanza emphasises, even after the key has been chosen it can be varied, as one seeks a better key. Then, once one has settled on a key and gained an orientation to the poem, the snowball that forms depends on the resisting winds – the poem itself, which is not a null space onto which just anything can be projected.

As I have said, I do not think Gadamer would object to this: it is very close to his concept of the prejudice-structure of understanding, and it corresponds fairly closely with the interpretive method he brings to bear on Celan’s poems. However, what is missing from Gadamer’s approach is a sense that not all of the needs and interests we bring to bear on a poem are equal. Sometimes we read a poem for the sake of pleasure in the way it engages our imaginative faculties –

²²⁴ ‘With a variable key’, translated by Michael Hamburger, *Poems of Paul Celan*, p. 95.

and when we read like this, there is little or nothing at stake, and in the end it doesn't matter whether our interpretation of the imagery or the meaning of the poem in any way corresponds to what the poet had in mind. One could, for example, read Owen's poem 'Futility' at a funeral, and it would not matter that the connection with soldiers in the trenches was lost – indeed, one could go further and suggest that a poem is enriched by its application in a variety of contexts beyond those envisaged by its author; one could even suggest that rigid insistence on fidelity to the original context and intention are death to a poem. But at other times what we're interested in when reading the poem is working out what the poet was trying to achieve or trying to say – and reading and discussing poetry often involves the ascription of various views to the poet on the basis of their poetry. With some lyric poetry, the question of what the poet had in mind may, paradoxically, be irrelevant to responding to what the poem is trying to achieve – a poem that revels in the sounds of its words and the juxtaposition of its images might not be trying to *say* anything. But a poet like Celan *is* trying to say something, and while we don't have to read him on those terms, it is hardly surprising that – at least some of the time – we should want to.

This is where Gadamer's claim to be simply unpacking the way readers do actually engage with the text comes undone. For he has implicitly chosen one particular way of reading, and then set this up as the normative model. This style of reading is that of the reader of lyric poetry for whom imaginative and personal engagement with the poem is more important than understanding the poem as a communicative act on the part of a poet with a particular set of concerns. This approach still allows Gadamer to acknowledge the need for some pieces of information not simply given in the poem (the particular dates it is concerned with, etc.), but this need is explicitly put into the service of allowing the reader to better engage with the poem as a piece of lyric. Conversely, one can read Celan's poems as attempts to provide an orientation with regard to the significance of the various events and occasions (i.e. those dates) inscribed in them.²²⁵ One need not, in the end, decide definitively in one direction or the other – Celan insists

²²⁵ Geuss presents some arguments to support the view that this is how Celan himself saw at least some of his poems: see again 'Celan's *Meridian*'.

that the key is 'variable' – but the point here is that Gadamer's method is not so neutral as it purports to be.

This objection can be broadened if one contrasts Gadamer's approach with an entirely different conception of the relation between reader and text: that of Borges's story 'Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*'.²²⁶ The story is well known, but I will quickly rehearse its key points: Pierre Menard sets out to re-write *Don Quixote*, not by copying it or reinterpreting it or retelling it, but by arriving at it himself. He first sets out to become Cervantes by learning 16th century Spanish and forgetting the last few hundred years of history; rejecting this approach as too easy (!), he resolves to arrive at *Don Quixote* through his own experience as Pierre Menard. The narrator proceeds through a few comparisons of (identical) passages by Cervantes and by Menard, finding them strikingly different in character and quality. The story concludes thus:

Menard (perhaps without wishing to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the hesitant and rudimentary art of reading: the technique is one of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions. This technique, with its infinite applications, urges us to run through the *Odyssey* as if it were written after the *Aeneid*, and to read *Le jardin du Centaure* by Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique would fill the dullest books with adventure. Would not the attributing of *The Imitation of Christ* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or James Joyce be a sufficient renovation of its tenuous spiritual counsels?²²⁷

What is of interest for us is not so much the positive suggestion (deliberate misattribution) as what it tells us about the way we normally read. It is perfectly normal to read a work with an eye to the positions it advances, and then attribute them to the author; this is, of course, made more complicated by poets,

²²⁶ Collected in Borges, *Ficciones*. This is a much-commented on story, but the discussion of it that prompted my inclusion of it here is that of Alberto Manguel, 'Faking It', collected in his *A Reader on Reading* (Yale, 2010). Manguel's marvelous essay, which at times feels like a Borges story, treats the story in the context of false attributions to Borges of various works he did not actually write.

²²⁷ 'Pierre Menard', p. 38.

writers of fiction, and others who adopt various masks in their writings.²²⁸ But it has certainly been my experience that I find it much easier to read an author if I have some idea of their general interests and what they have to say on a range of topics: any given passage is easier to grasp if one has a sense of the author in general; I find it harder to read unattributed fragments than the work of a named author. This is the old hermeneutical circle of part and whole, and Gadamer's poetics, by focusing on the poem as it stands, partially elides the circle, and loses sight of the way sometimes something is interesting not just because of what it says, but because of who said it.

We can see this elision at play in Gadamer's reading of Celan. Oddly, at one stage Gadamer passes over a poem in the *Breath-crystal* cycle as impenetrable to his method. Here is the poem, which is positioned third-last in the cycle:

(Ich kenne dich, du bist die tief Gebeugte,
ich, der Durchbohrte, bin dir untertan.
Wo flammt ein Wort, das für uns beide zeugte?
Du – ganz, ganz wirklich. Ich – ganz Wahn.)

[(I know you, you're the deeply bowing, bowed,
I, the drilled through, to you am subjugate.
Where flames one word that for us both could vouch?
You – wholly real. I – all delusion, mad.)]²²⁹

The most obvious typographical feature of the poem is the way it is set in parentheses, bracketing it off from the flow of the cycle. Gadamer, for this reason, treats it as of more private significance than the other poems: 'The I that speaks here and admits in the end to being "wholly illusion" [*ganz Wahn* – 'all delusion, mad' in Hamburger's translation] is not transformed in these verses into that

²²⁸ A particular challenge for reading authors whose works have characters in them (and we must including the narrator as a character) is the attribution of a character's views to the author. This is highlighted in a very amusing story Borges tells about a man who stopped him in the street to ask if he really possessed the seventh volume of the encyclopedia from the story 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (collected in *Ficciones*); when Borges told him he did not in fact possess it, that it was only a story, the man responded: 'It's all a lie, then?' (Borges & Ferrari, *Conversations*, trans. Jason Wilson [Seagull Books, 2014], vol. 1, p. 111.)

²²⁹ Trans. Hamburger, in *Poems of Paul Celan*, p. 265.

omnipresent I of lyric poetry in which poet and reader are fused together' (GC 122). Both the I and the You of this poem thus seem to Gadamer to be singular individuals, and thus not of general significance – which is to say, not of significance to the rest of us.

I say this is an odd place for Gadamer to abandon his usual interpretive approach because this poem perfectly captures Gadamer's hermeneutics of charity. I, who am all delusion, subject myself to you, whom I recognise as wholly real; I seek a word that could vouch for both of us: a word that would bring us into agreement. We have seen that Gadamer's hermeneutics is oriented towards resisting the delusions and fancies that the I is always at risk of falling into, and that it checks this tendency by insisting on the dialogical primacy of the other who calls into question what I had taken to be the case. To see the I as delusion and the You as real captures this precisely. For Gadamer's hermeneutics, this is a poem of universal significance – it describes how each I should relate to each You. But he glosses over this poem because it seems to him to be related only the experiences of some particular, singular individuals.

This aversion to the particular is the peculiarity I referred to at the beginning of this section. We can see it in his minimalist treatment '(I know you...)', in his universalist reading of 'Tenebrae', in his preference for lyric, and in his sidelining of the particular dates inscribed in Celan's poems. These are not aberrations, but the result of the central movement of Gadamer's hermeneutics: the other is a partner in dialogue who offers an alternative perspective and voices criticisms, but they are not an *individual*, this singular other who appears before me – for to particularise them would come dangerously close to psychologising them, and trying to explain what they have said by appeal to their particularities. This is why the other is treated as 'wholly real' while I am 'wholly delusion': in the contrast between delusion and reality, reality is the absence of delusion: thus the 'real' other is given authority over the 'delusional' self. The irony is that the 'real' human being is actually partially constituted by their delusions; but to know them in their real delusion would be to insulate my prejudices from their delusional perspective.²³⁰ Montaigne is rather more circumspect: noting his own

²³⁰ This is precisely why Gadamer says that psychoanalytic interpretation 'goes in a totally different direction' to his hermeneutics: 'Psychoanalytic interpretation does not seek to

fallibility, especially that of his memory, he says that he would ‘always accept the truth in matters of fact from another man’s mouth rather than from my own’, except that ‘what I do for lack of memory, others do still more often for lack of good faith’.²³¹ We would do well, in other words, not to be *too* impressed by our own finitude.

This is a different objection to that mounted by Bernasconi and Derrida. For their objection is that Gadamer is forever trying to assimilate the other to the self, which I have attempted to show is a misreading of the whole direction of his thought. The objection I am making against Gadamer could equally be made against Derrida and Bernasconi as well: in reacting against what they recognise as a tendency of the self to try to assimilate the other, and thus insisting on the unknowability of the other and on their dialogical priority over the self, they wind up making the particular human being disappear; and all we are left with is an unfillable gap that offers provocations and challenges and to which I am to subordinate myself without ever knowing who they are.

Coda: The Relevance of Poetry for Philosophical Hermeneutics

What then is the relevance of poetry for philosophical hermeneutics? Gadamer identifies two points, both of which are important.

First, the poem is the purest example of what we might call ‘thickened’ language – language that, rather than (seemingly) transparently showing something beyond itself, is self-standing: as Gadamer puts it, the poem ‘stands’.²³² As Gadamer says towards the essay ‘On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth’, our basic task is to make ourselves ‘at home’ in the world. Language – especially our mother tongue – not only gives us a world, but it also gives the world a feeling of nearness, rightness and familiarity.²³³ The poem, by being freestanding and not mirroring the world, allows us to dwell on the purely

understand what someone wants to say, but instead what that person doesn’t want to say or even admit to him or herself.’ (*Dialogue & Deconstruction*, p. 56.)

²³¹ Montaigne, ‘Of Experience’, p. 1002.

²³² Gadamer, ‘On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth’ (collected in RB), p. 107. For the ‘thickening’ of language in the literary work, see Foucault, *Language, Madness, and Desire*, ed. Philippe Artières et al., trans. Robert Bononno (Minnesota, 2015), p. 46.

²³³ RB 114.

linguistic; in a poem, we stand for a while in the nearness and familiarity of language.²³⁴ But by doing so it allows us to see just how linguistic the whole world is: the seeming transparency of language in its everyday functions of naming and describing is deeply deceptive. There are not two opposed functions of language, one of them describing the world as it is anyway, the other inventing things that are not. All language invents the world; it is precisely because the world and its contents have been named by us that we can feel at home in the world; it is just that its inventive character can be more or less in play. Sometimes what matters is to accord with already-established inventions; other times it is a matter of coming up with a new and more fitting formulation. The poem merely concentrates this inventive power of language to create something that exists purely in language, rather than gathering and elaborating on the raw material of the world.²³⁵

This is the general significance of poetry for hermeneutics. It is of deep significance, but limited in scope, since it elides the individuality of the particular poem, and makes the significance of all poems the same. This leads us to the second point of relevance of poetry for hermeneutics: the poem offers a genuine experience.²³⁶ This is true in two ways, which can be brought out in connection with Plato's discussion of poetry in the *Ion*.

Plato's *Ion* poses two different philosophical problems about poetry. The first is the question of the relation between poet and poem, of exactly to what extent the poet can be said to have consciously determined the poem they write. In his discussion of this point, Plato suggests the marvellous image of the muse as a kind of magnet, to whom a poet is attracted and attaches, like an iron ring; and, by virtue of this attachment, the poet is granted the attractive power of the magnet, which then leads them to attract further iron rings, or listeners.

The second is the problem of the relation between poetry and truth, and is posed at the end of the dialogue. Socrates has been interrogating Ion about his art, that of the rhapsode. Ion has just won a competition for his recitation of Homer; and he claims that to understand a poem is to understand everything the poet meant, which is to understand everything the poet understood. Since

²³⁴ RB 115.

²³⁵ See again the discussion of the ontology of language in Ch. 1, 2(b).

²³⁶ See again GC 73 on the genuine experience of the poem.

Homer demonstrated a great understanding of generalship (or so it is said), of what generals should say and do and when, Ion is forced to admit that he, too, has a great understanding of generalship. Socrates asks if perhaps he, Ion, is not then the greatest general among the Athenians, to which Ion, presumably feeling himself backed into a corner or maybe just because he lacks any self-critical distance, responds that indeed he is. It is all very funny, and Ion is revealed to be a ridiculous character. But nonetheless it poses a serious problem: what is the relationship between poetry and truth? What is it that we understand when we understand poetry? Clearly, as Plato's ridicule has shown, it is not that we understand the objects to which the poem 'refers': reading and reciting the *Iliad* is not good training for generalship. But then what is it that the poem does?

How do these two issues relate to hermeneutics and poetry? In the case of the first question, there is the problem of the relation between poet and poem. Hermeneutically, the task of the poet is to get beneath our ordinary ways of seeing and thinking, and to bring things into language afresh. The poem is the concretion of this, the poet's genuine experience. This need not suggest that the poet must totally understand the poem they have composed; a poem that is entirely circumscribed by the poet's understanding is probably not much of a poem, in any case. As in Plato's image, they may have found themselves seized by the significance of something, though they do not fully know what it is or what its significance is – like an iron ring on a magnet, they are in its grip. That the poet does not necessarily fully know the truth of their poem is no objection, however: a genuine experience is frequently ongoing and unresolved; what matters is that the poem is able to transmit that magnetic, electrifying quality on to the reader.

This brings us to the second issue, that of the relation of the poetry to truth. The kind of truth in play is not that of a systematic body of knowledge, nor of scattered propositions. Ion's suggestion that knowing Homer makes him a good general is ridiculous. However, these two possibilities do not exhaust what a poem might offer us. One might not learn to be a good general from Homer, but that does not mean one learns nothing. One might even learn something about leadership and the risks of certain leadership ploys, as one sees Agamemnon's failed attempt to rally the troops by playing up the hopelessness of their

situation (*Iliad*, Book II).²³⁷ A poem, more generally, offers a way of seeing and feeling, which is to say an orientation towards what things are and what their significance is. Openness to this requires of the reader an openness to the poem's way of seeing and feeling, which means an openness to the difference between that way of seeing and feeling and one's own habitual ways. The poem invites one to consider something new, or something old in a new way, and thereby fuses with and expands one's horizon. This is true even when the poem in question is very old, as Homer's are. When one encounters them for the first time (even though they have been formative for the world in which one has grown up), or when one reads them again, one finds all kinds of provocations; the measure of a classic is the inexhaustibility of its horizon. But there are also provocations to be found in good little poems of much less grand scope, such as (to take but a recent example), 'The Cloud' by Christopher Reid:

When the precocious Tadworth twins, Nigel and Phil,
drew me aside in the changing room to explain
how things really worked, what men did to women,
the body parts involved and the manner in which they were used,
it was as if a great, blanking cloud had lifted
and a new one taken its place.²³⁸

Here we have an ordinary pre-adolescent experience – the spreading of lurid tales about sex – transformed into the expression of a mystery. The poem achieves this effect through the transition from the fifth to the sixth line: had the poem ended with the fifth line, we would have a tale of enlightenment, in which something mysterious suddenly becomes clear. But instead we are told that the explanation merely replaced one mystery (rooted in ignorance) with another (rooted in knowledge). The poem asks us: do we really understand sex when we know the parts and motions? Is sex not much more puzzling than that –

²³⁷ Translated as *The Anger of Achilles* by Robert Graves (Cassell, 1960). Graves reads this moment as an instance of Homer's 'merciless' wit in his treatment of the Greek heroes: 'Introduction', p. xv.

²³⁸ Christopher Reid, *The Curiosities* (Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 10.

especially when it is cast in purely biological terms (as it is in this poem), without reference to the drives and desires that motivate us?

To say that poetry has some connection to truth, and that this connection is rooted in ways of seeing and feeling, is not necessarily to claim that there is *one* way of seeing and feeling that is most appropriate, and that the truth of the poem consists in capturing this. While one might like to commit oneself to this (Romantic) conception of the truth of the poem,²³⁹ it seems to me that the core of the hermeneutical interest in the poem is the challenge it offers by presenting a way of seeing and feeling that is distinct from one's own, and thus offers a challenge to it and allows one to see one's own perspective anew. This is a sense of truth that we will discuss in the next chapter as the 'truth event'. The fundamental connection between poetry and truth is thus distinct from the three possibilities Geuss discusses in his essay on 'Poetry and Knowledge': propositional knowledge ('I know that such-and-such is the case'), knowledge-as-skill ('I know how to ride a bike'), and knowledge-as-acquaintance ('I know Sam/Paris/what my bike looks like').²⁴⁰ Geuss goes through each of these in turn, and shows that it is doubtful that poetry has any special relation to any one of these kinds of knowledge (although in any particular case it *may* provide some form of knowledge to the reader). His arguments are salutary, but do not touch on the connection between poetry and truth that interested Gadamer.

Poetry is thus important for philosophical hermeneutics in two ways: by existing purely within language, the poem calls attention to the way language is bound up in everything; and the poem also offers provocations to genuine experience. This, it should be said, is the hermeneutical relevance of poetry, but not an exhaustive account of the potential ways one might take an interest in poetry. One does not always read a poem in order to be reminded of the linguisticity of all experience, or to have one's perspective challenged. The reasons one might read a poem are at least as varied as the reasons a poem

²³⁹ See Geuss's discussion of the 'Romantic' and 'Platonic' ways of thinking about truth in poetry in 'Poetry and Knowledge', collected in his *Outside Ethics*, p. 197. Roughly, the 'Platonic' approach is to suppose that an accurate description of the world is sufficient to determine how one should feel about it, while on the Romantic the facts are not enough: the appropriate feeling is an achievement. Geuss is sceptical that there is a single correct/appropriate/true/fitting way of seeing and feeling, suggesting that they have a necessarily loose fit to reality.

²⁴⁰ 'Poetry and Knowledge', p. 185.

might be written: one might be seeking amusement, entertainment, distraction, information, wisdom, a *bon mot*, a puzzle, a doctrine, a celebration, an elegy; one might want to study a philosophical position (as one might read Lucretius), to learn about the author's life (Wordsworth's *Prelude*), or to impress somebody at a dinner party; the list of reasons could be expanded indefinitely.²⁴¹ It would be a mistake to limit poetry to its hermeneutical interest – or to suppose that every poem will be hermeneutically interesting.

How does poetry differ, from the hermeneutical perspective, from other literary genres, such as the novel? A novel, just like a poem, exists purely in language;²⁴² and it too can subvert one's expectations or call something into question. The difference, it seems to me, is one of degree, and one that depends on the poem or novel in question. There is, this is to say, a question of sub-genre: prose poem, lyric, epic, etc. This can be brought out with reference again to Homer's *Iliad*. Parts of the *Iliad* can be rendered as a prose narrative not easily distinguishable from a novel; other parts, such as the similes, are rather more 'poetic'. Take this example, from Alice Oswald's moving version of the *Iliad* (which consists only of the similes, the names of the dead and the violence visited upon them – the narrative has been stripped away):

Like leaves
Sometimes they light their green flames
And are fed by the earth
And sometimes it snuffs them out²⁴³

Here we have an image of human lives as leaves, and their variable fates pictured as the fates of leaves we are so used to seeing: sometimes they are bright and green and healthy (and the mixing in of the flame metaphor adds movement and vigour), and at other times they wither. The suggestion that it is the earth that snuffs them out brings us up short, and perhaps refers to the withering of the leaves at their proper time when the earth cools and autumn sets in; it also

²⁴¹ See also Geuss, 'Poetry and Knowledge', pp. 204-5.

²⁴² Gadamer's own example in 'On the Contribution of Poetry ...' (RB 111) of a purely linguistic creation is that of the staircase Smerdjakov falls down in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

²⁴³ Alice Oswald, *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 15.

recalls us to the way something may nurture us at one time and harm us at another, or the way it may help one person while harming someone else. The image of natural decline that it suggests is also provocative in the context of a poem one of the central features of which is the way lives are violently cut short.²⁴⁴

These moments in the *Iliad* are more poetic than others partly because they employ a poetic device (the simile), in part because of their compression, and in part because one's response to them is more heightened.²⁴⁵ These three aspects are internally related: the very compression of a well-handled simile (or metaphor, or synecdoche, etc.) – and compression here refers to how suggestively packed the language is, even if it is a lengthy passage – is what prompts the heightened response. Further, a poem – unlike a piece of descriptive prose – is deeply concerned with its formal and aural qualities. In this way, it calls one's attention to the particularities of the language it is composed in – the (often very suggestive) rhythms and rhymes and assonances and echoes that are possible in that language, but often not in another, which is why poems are famously the hardest things to translate. These, then, are some of the reasons why poetry is of deep hermeneutical significance, even above and beyond the importance of other literary genres – although this is not to suggest that other genres lack hermeneutical relevance, as we will see in the final section of Ch. 5 when we turn to genuine experience and narrative.

With this we can conclude our discussion of genuine experience. As opposed to ordinary experience, in which nothing stands out and nothing mounts a serious challenge to our expectations, and as opposed to heightened experience, in which something stands out but not in such a way as to mount a challenge, a genuine experience is one in which something stands out in such a way as to mount a challenge. A genuine experience is unpredictable, in two ways: I cannot know when I will undergo one; and I cannot know what the outcome will be. This is the central concept for Gadamer's entire hermeneutics: the experience that

²⁴⁴ There are issues of translation here – Oswald's version is fairly loose – but they do not matter much for the point here, which is primarily about the poetic, rather than about the *Iliad*.

²⁴⁵ Graves's translation *The Anger of Achilles* follows precisely this division, rendering most of the text as prose narrative, and switching to verse for those parts that demand poetic treatment.

draws me out of myself and changes the way I see things. In the final chapter I will subject Gadamer's privileging of this concept to criticism; but first, in the following chapter, we will see the way this concept is intimately connected with the Gadamer's concepts of truth, understanding and interpretation.

IV – Gadamer on Truth

Having set out Gadamer's account of genuine experience, we are now on the downward slope. Two tasks remain for us. First, we need to fill out the account of genuine experience by bringing in a constellation of concepts that are closely bound up with it, and which serve to expand and elaborate it: these are Gadamer's concepts of truth and interpretation. This is the aim of the present chapter. In the next chapter, we will turn to our final task: a critical assessment of the structure of Gadamer's hermeneutical account of experience.

Truth, for some, is the correspondence of the mind to its object; for others, it is a matter of a proposition picking out some feature of the world ('P' is true if and only if P). Others contend that truth is a matter of the coherence of beliefs (or perhaps of propositions) with each other; and yet others hold that truth is being. Some say that truth is mind-dependent (that there would be no truth if there were no minds), while others say that what is true is true regardless of the presence or absence of minds.

Gadamer, notoriously, does not devote much time to spelling out what exactly he means by truth. He is taken by some to be a 'realist', in that what makes things true is that they really are that way.²⁴⁶ Others contend that, since Gadamer brings being and language into such close proximity, there is no 'way things are' that could serve as a ground for the truth.²⁴⁷ Some think truth for Gadamer is a flash of insight,²⁴⁸ while others think it is a matter of tarrying and taking time.²⁴⁹ Contradiction, one can see, is rife. I would contend that what Paul Healy calls the 'considerable interpretive challenge'²⁵⁰ posed by elucidating Gadamer's concept of truth is compounded by that concept itself: for the concept of truth Gadamer

²⁴⁶ In quite different ways, Grondin, 'Metaphysical or Nihilistic...', and Wachterhauser 'Getting it Right: Relativism, Realism and Truth' (in Dostal [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*) hold something like this view.

²⁴⁷ E.g. Andrzej Wiercinski (2009), 'Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience', *Analecta Hermeneutica*, 1, 1, pp. 3-14.

²⁴⁸ E.g. Lawrence K. Schmidt, 'Uncovering Hermeneutic Truth', in Schmidt (ed.) *The Specter of Relativism*.

²⁴⁹ E.g. Robert Dostal, 'The Experience of Truth for Gadamer and Heidegger: Taking Time and Sudden Lightning', in Wachterhauser (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Truth*.

²⁵⁰ Paul Healy, 'Truth and Relativism', in Malpas & Gander (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics* (Routledge, 2015), p. 292.

employs is not unitary, and in order to make sense of it, two distinctions have to be made. First, a distinction must be made between the 'phenomenological' and the 'hermeneutical'; second, a distinction must be made between 'understanding' and 'interpretation' (and it should be noted that Gadamer employs these terms in specific ways, which we shall discuss in more detail when we come to them). We will see that, once these distinctions are employed, each of the above contending views can be seen to be a part of the whole.

Corresponding to the first distinction, we can distinguish between 'truth-as-adequatio' and 'truth-as-aletheia'; corresponding to the second distinction, we can distinguish between the 'truth event' and 'truth-as-fittingness'. All four aspects of truth are operative within Gadamer's hermeneutics. By way of anticipation, let us consider preliminary glosses of each of these:

Truth-as-adequatio: truth is the adequacy of my understanding to the thing – truth is a measure of how well my understanding conforms to it.

Truth-as-aletheia: truth is the disclosure of something as what it is – this is a more fundamental sense of truth, since it is only if something is already disclosed as such-and-such that my understanding can conform to it as that.

The truth event: this is the moment when I suddenly realised the inadequacy of my previous understanding of something – when my understanding is disrupted, and I am forced to look upon the thing anew.

Truth-as-fittingness: following a disruption in my understanding, I am forced to work out a new way of understanding something – this means working out a new interpretation, the measure of which is how well it 'fits' the thing under consideration.

As we can see, there are close connections between these aspects of truth; these connections, and the distinctions between them, will come into clearer focus as we proceed. We will first set out the distinction between the phenomenological and the hermeneutical, and show ways in which both are present in Gadamer's thought. Then we will turn to the concept of understanding, and its relation to the truth event, and then show that the truth event means different things at the phenomenological and hermeneutical levels. We will then return to the concepts of understanding and interpretation, show

where truth-as-fittingness fits in, and then tease out some of the ambiguities in the concept of understanding.

1. Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

Let us begin with the distinction between the 'phenomenological' and the 'hermeneutical'. A *phenomenological* account of truth is one that attends to the way things are given in experience and the role of the subject in that experience, and will understand truth as the disclosure of this or that particular thing. However, things can only appear as this or that within a world or a horizon, which pre-exists the subject and shapes the experiences that subject has, and it is with this horizon that *hermeneutical* truth is concerned.²⁵¹

Both hermeneutical and phenomenological concerns are present in *Truth and Method*, and both appear together in the discussion of the relation between language and the world (TM III 3(A), pp. 444-5). Human experience of the world, he says, 'is verbal in nature', which 'broadens the horizon of our analysis of hermeneutical experience'. (We can see that he is foreshadowing his claim about the universality of hermeneutics, which occurs in TM III 3(C).) However, that experience of the world is verbal 'is not a barrier that prevents knowledge of being-in-itself but fundamentally embraces everything in which our insight can be enlarged and deepened.' As we saw earlier, Gadamer opposes the disconnection between our linguistic experience on the one hand, and the world on the other – and sees, instead, the former as embracing the latter.

²⁵¹ While I have framed it in fresh terms, I note that this basic distinction occurs elsewhere in the literature, although not in this connection. It is the basis, for example, of Helmut Kuhn's distinction between horizon as "that which lies beyond the immediately given" and as "inherent potentialities" (see 'The Phenomenological Concept of "Horizon"', especially p. 166). Or, more recently, a similar distinction also appears in Nenon's argument that one of the differences between Gadamer and Dilthey lies in Dilthey's emphasis on what Nenon calls the 'subjective' (which is similar to what I have called the 'phenomenological') and Gadamer's emphasis on what I have called the 'hermeneutical'. See Nenon, 'Hermeneutical Truth and the Structure of Human Experience: Gadamer's Critique of Dilthey', in Schmidt (ed.), *The Specter of Relativism*. Finally, in Ricoeur's discussion of the distinction between phenomenology and hermeneutics, he notes (with reference to Gadamer) that part of the distinction turns on the difference between *what* is brought into language (phenomenology), and the *way* it is brought into language (hermeneutics). Hermeneutics has a phenomenological presupposition (the thing given in experience), while phenomenology has a hermeneutical presupposition (that the thing can be explicated). See Ricoeur, 'Phenomenology and Hermeneutics', *Nous* (1975), 9, 1, pp. 98-102.

He notes that while it is true that different linguistic and cultural traditions see the world in different ways, and that historical “worlds” are different from those before and after; ‘but in whatever tradition we consider it, it is always a human – i.e., verbally constituted – world that presents itself to us’ and ‘as verbally constituted, every such world is of itself always open to every possible insight and hence to every expansion of its own world picture, and is accordingly available to others.’ Thus the idea of measuring our view of the world against the ‘world in itself’ is problematic: ‘the criterion for the continuing expansion of our own world picture is not given by a “world in itself” that lies beyond all language’; rather, since human experience is ‘infinitely perfectible’, whatever language we use, we only ever extend our view of the world – but always remain within a view of the world. ‘Those views are not relative in the sense that one could oppose them to the “world in itself”, as if the right view from some possible outside the human, linguistic world could discover it in its being-in-itself.’ ‘No one doubts that the world can exist without man and perhaps will do so. This is part of the meaning in which every human, linguistically constituted view of the world lives. In every worldview the existence of the world-in-itself is intended.’ However, the multiplicity of worldviews does not relativise the world: ‘rather, the world is not different from the views in which it presents itself.’ It is at this point that he moves in the direction of the phenomenological:

The relationship is the same in the perception of things. Seen phenomenologically, the “thing-in-itself” is, as Husserl has shown, nothing but the continuity with which the various perceptual perspectives on objects shade into one another. A person who opposes “being-in-itself” to these “aspects” must think either theologically – in which case the “being-in-itself” is not for him but only for God – or he will think like Lucifer, like one who wants to prove his own divinity by the fact that the whole world has to obey him. In this case the world’s being-in-itself is a limitation of the omnipotence of his imagination.
(TM 444-5)

As this passage makes clear, Gadamer never loses sight of the way our cognitive faculties are engaged with a reality that is not reducible to them. The imagination, as he puts it, is not omnipotent; and this shows up the falsehood of such assessments as this: 'Hermeneutic truth does not signify the correspondence of mental states to objective reality. It is not a matter of adequation between the cognizing subject and the object in-itself, according to the definition *adaequatio intellectus et rei*. For Gadamer, hermeneutic truth is a matter of mutual agreement between partners engaged in dialogue and seeking common understanding. It is far more existential, and in this respect an ethical aspect of being-in-the-world.'²⁵² On this model, the partners in dialogue agree *with* each other, but not *about* anything.²⁵³

On the other hand, expressing his hermeneutical bent the page before, Gadamer observes that what is 'conceive[d] as existent emerges as *logos*, as an expressible matter of fact, from the surrounding whole that constitutes the world-horizon of language' (TM 443). These two levels – the hermeneutical and the phenomenological – are intimately connected: a thing cannot appear without appearing within a horizon (the world); but the world does not itself appear,²⁵⁴ but is rather manifest in the way things appear. This is the point of contact between the hermeneutical and the phenomenological modes, which otherwise can pull in contrary directions.

We see this tension, for example, in Gadamer's discussion of genuine experience [*Erfahrung*]. This discussion centres around the role anticipations play in our understanding of things, anticipations guided by our prejudices. When these anticipations are defied by some phenomenon, we become aware of a prejudice of which we were not previously aware, but that nonetheless has formed part of the horizon by which we make sense of things. Attendance to the phenomena, then, can call into question aspects of the horizon – and we thus learn something about this particular thing and the horizon of our experiences. But here Gadamer takes up the hermeneutical dimension much more: the

²⁵² Wiercinski, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience', p. 11.

²⁵³ See Jeff Malpas, 'Gadamer, Davidson, and the Ground of Understanding' (collected in Malpas et al. (eds.), *Gadamer's Century*) for the importance of 'triangulation' (self-other-object) in hermeneutic thought.

²⁵⁴ Nor does the tradition: 'The mode of being of tradition is not, of course, sensible immediacy.' (TM 459)

experience of having our expectations defied ultimately teaches us not so much 'this or that thing' but to appreciate our own historicity and finitude, those constant features of human experience (TM 351).

We can see the same hermeneutical concern at the forefront of his essay from 1954, 'Truth in the Human Sciences'.²⁵⁵ Here he takes up the question of how this truth is to be distinguished from that of the natural sciences. Gadamer outright rejects the 'relativism' and 'nihilism' of historicism (p. 27); while there is nothing like the methodological security of the natural sciences, this does not mean that we should give up on the project of the human sciences, or restrict it to the domain of the methodological certainty – rather, this calls for us to 'remain mindful' so as to save ourselves from 'delusion' (p. 29).²⁵⁶

What is it that we might become deluded about? 'What we know historically is, in the final analysis, ourselves' (p. 29); and 'what we ourselves are and what we are capable of heeding from the past is not arbitrary and not optional'. In other words, as historical beings who live in historical communities, we cannot understand ourselves without historical inquiry – and what we find through historical inquiry is not arbitrary, and its interest to us is not arbitrary either. While there is always the danger of manipulation by external political powers, or – more insidiously – the danger of being lead astray by one's own inclinations, or the unconscious desire to meet with the approval of the public (p. 30), because of the importance of the task of the human sciences – our understanding of ourselves has an effect – they have a responsibility to hold to the truth (p. 31).

In light of our discussion of genuine experience previously, some of Gadamer's remarks take on particular interest. The kind of research that deserves our support, he says, is not inoffensive research that just presents something to us as we already supposed it was, but rather research that offers a provocation (*Anstoss*) (p. 29). This is because what research in the human sciences is closely bound up with our understanding of ourselves, and being told things that conform to our self-understanding hardly does us much good; unless we suppose that we already have a perfect self-understanding (in which case we are

²⁵⁵ Translated by Wachterhauser in Wachterhauser (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Truth*. Page references are to this edition.

²⁵⁶ In this connection, Jean Grondin makes 'vigilance' one of the central themes of his account of Gadamer's philosophy in *The Philosophy of Gadamer*.

deluded), what we need is provocative research to make us 'recognise the new and fruitful, which we ourselves do not see because we have our own ways before our eyes'.

What we get from this essay, then, is not so much a direct account of truth as an account of its function and importance. The kind of truth Gadamer is concerned with is the truth involved in our self-understanding. Its function is to resist and challenge the distortions of our self-understanding, and to prevent us from slipping into complacent or self-serving delusions. But these truths are the truths that occur at the margins of our experiences, and thereby give shape to them. For understanding ourselves through history means better understanding the world in light of which we make sense of ourselves, and the concepts we employ when we make sense of ourselves and the world. So again we have the truth not of particular things, but the truth of a horizon that does not distort what appears within it.

The other thing to note in this essay is that we can see the connection between the 'provocation' of original research and 'genuine experience'. In another essay from this period during the writing of *Truth and Method*,²⁵⁷ Gadamer observes that real research requires the ability to 'break through that which controls our entire thinking and knowing like a closed and impermeable layer of smoothed-over opinions' (p. 42). This will be important for us when we discuss the truth event, below.

Phenomenological concerns are more prominent in the notoriously dense closing pages of *Truth and Method*.²⁵⁸ Here Gadamer suggests two ways in which the 'idea of the beautiful' can illuminate hermeneutical experiences.²⁵⁹

The first is in relation to the experience of a statement or argument as 'probable' (*wahrscheinlich*) or 'evident' (*einleuchtend*). The German terms both conjure up ideas of 'light': *einleuchtend* literally means 'shining in',²⁶⁰ and has an echo of *Erleuchtung* ('illumination') about it; and *wahrscheinlich* literally means

²⁵⁷ 'What is truth?' (1957), also translated by Wachterhauser and collected in Wachterhauser (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Truth*.

²⁵⁸ For some discussion of their density, see Grondin, 'On the Composition of *Truth and Method*', in Schmidt (ed.), *The Specter of Relativism*. p. 37.

²⁵⁹ We are concerned with pages 479ff.

²⁶⁰ This is the gloss Weinsheimer and Marshall give for it in their translation of TM.

‘true-shining’. Gadamer takes this as a helpful lead for thinking about the way an argument, even one we are disagreeing with, can have something plausible about it – although, he notes, precisely what in an argument seems plausible always needs further investigation:

What is evident (*einleuchtend*) is always something that is said – a proposal, a plan, a conjecture, an argument, or something of the sort. The idea is always that what is evident has not been proved and is not absolutely certain, but it asserts itself by reason of its own merit within the realm of the possible and probable. Thus we can even admit that an argument has something evidently true about it, even though we are presenting a counterargument. How it is to be reconciled with the whole of what we ourselves consider correct is left open. It is only said that it is evident “in itself” – i.e., that there is something in its favour. (TM 479-80)

This needs careful interpretation. If what Gadamer means is what Wachterhauser takes him to²⁶¹ – that all plausible utterances have a connection with their *Sache*, which shines through in them – then this is false: statements that are totally divorced from reality can seem completely plausible to me if I am uncritical enough and they accord with my prejudices.²⁶² But if what he means is that genuine speech – not idle chatter, but speech connected with genuine experience of the *Sache* – makes the *Sache* present (cf. TM 483) and presents it in an illuminating light, elaborates it, brings it into focus, then this has something to it.

The passage we are considering is compressed and imprecise. Considered in isolation, it would seem to support Wachterhauser’s reading. However, in the first sentence of the next paragraph, Gadamer draws attention to genuine experience. If we recall what is essential about genuine experience – an experience that calls my understanding into question, that breaks through the

²⁶¹ Wachterhauser, ‘Gadamer’s Realism’, pp. 159-160.

²⁶² As the priest says of Don Quixote: ‘But isn’t it strange to see how readily this poor gentleman believes all these fictions and lies, and just because they ape the style and the formulas he finds in his books?’ (*Don Quijote*, Part I, Ch. 30)

smoothed-over surface of my opinions – then we can see this passage in a different light. While he does not make it explicit, this passage is best understood as concerned with the experience of plausibility of views that are *not* our own (this is presumably the meaning of ‘even though we are presenting a counterargument’); and this seems to be the meaning of the final part of the paragraph under consideration: ‘[W]hat is evident is always something surprising as well, like a new light being turned on, expanding the range of what we can take into consideration’ (TM 480). The function of the plausible, then, is to call our attention to aspects of something that our current understanding of it cannot account for – to direct our attention back to the *Sache*. Similarly, Gadamer suggests that one of the features of an experience of the tradition is that on being understood it ‘disturbs the horizon that had, until then, surrounded us’ (TM 480).²⁶³

We should also consider Lawrence Schmidt’s reading of the section under consideration.²⁶⁴ For Schmidt, the evident (*das Einleuchtende*) is the criterion for hermeneutical truth. Against the obvious objection, that sometime we feel like something is evident but we turn out to be totally mistaken, he argues that something’s being evident is less a feeling and more an experience, comparable to the concept of ‘evidence’ in Husserl (p. 80). However, even if we were to grant this, his argument unravels when he argues that even though sometimes we feel certain about something, we can later recognise – in light of a new evident experience – that we were mistaken, and that we ultimately learn that we are finite and fallible (p. 81). To claim that the evident is the criterion of truth, but that we can be mistaken about the experience of evidentness, is to fall into the ‘no true Scotsman’ fallacy, and to render the concept useless. What we took to be evident turns out not to be so; ‘evidentness’ turns out to need its own criterion, else the criterion be criterion-less.

We should not, then, take this as a *criterion* for truth. Sometimes a flash of insight, a sudden realisation in which a previously un-considered option appears evident, turns out to be a dead end or totally unfruitful. So while the experience

²⁶³ The reader will notice that this parallels my objections to Bernasconi at the end of the previous chapter.

²⁶⁴ Schmidt, ‘Uncovering Hermeneutic Truth’, in Schmidt (ed.) *The Specter of Relativism*. The following page references are to this essay.

of 'enlightening' occurs with the 'truth event' (the flash of insight), it is not the criterion for it, since it can be mistaken. This is perfectly consistent with Gadamer's general concern about our finitude fallibility: sometimes we just cannot tell whether we have really seized upon something, or whether our cognitive faculties are just spinning in the void. We have to wait to see whether the insight is borne out. When Gadamer speaks of a 'criterion' for the correct interpretation of a poem in his book on Paul Celan, it is the criterion of 'coherence' – how well an interpretation can bring all of the elements of a poem into a coherent relation with each other. But he immediately disavows any *firm* criterion on the very next page, when he affirms that every interpretation of a poem is only provisional.²⁶⁵

So much for the first connection Gadamer notes between the idea of the beautiful and hermeneutical experience. The second is an ontological one. 'If we start from the basic ontological view that being is *language* – i.e., *self-presentation* – as revealed to us by the hermeneutical experience of being, then there follows not only the event-character of the beautiful and the event-structure of all understanding' (TM 481). The basic idea is to overcome the opposition between a thing in itself and the way it appears. The Platonic form of beauty 'is not radiance shed on a form from without' but rather its 'ontological constitution [...] is to be radiant': in other words, the form of the beautiful does not, by shining on them, render things beautiful that otherwise would not be, but rather is itself manifest in them. Thus it always appears as an image. Similarly, when we experience something, when it appears to us, what we experience is not a representation of the thing but rather a presentation, an image, of the thing itself: 'What presents itself [...] is not different from itself in presenting itself' (TM 481). Here we have Gadamer the phenomenologist through and through.

The distinction between the phenomenological and the hermeneutical is an important one to bear in mind, since what it is we are trying to understand may belong to one or the other of the levels. As we discussed way back with regard to prejudices, sometimes there is an element of *adequatio* in Gadamer's account, which some commentators think could be a lingering element of the

²⁶⁵ See GC 145-6.

epistemological tradition that he has not yet overcome.²⁶⁶ We need not see it in this way. *Adequatio* is a perfectly adequate conception of truth for what we have been calling the phenomenological domain, where the concern is with how something is given to me in experience. As we saw above, Gadamer is insistent that there is something 'there' that I experience and interpret, and I may simply be mistaken about what that something is – which is to say, my prejudices may be wrong or misleading. When it is a matter of my prejudices not adequately conforming to what something is, the correction of those prejudices leads to a truer understanding of what the thing is. This is the place for truth-as-adequatio.

However, truth-as-adequatio does not go all the way down, since it is a question only the mind's relation to its object. It must presuppose that the object already *is* in one way rather than the other. On one traditional view, things are what they are because they correspond to ideas in the mind of God; on another traditional view, they simply are what they are, waiting for the mind to discover them. One of Heidegger's achievements in *Being and Time* was to explicitly undermine the latter view (and, implicitly, the former) by demonstrating the concealed dimension of concern and interest in the way things are: the world consists of these objects, divided into these groups according to these categories, because we live in a particular way, have some set of interests and concerns, and want to do certain things. In a way, he turned the saying 'When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail' into a principle of ontology. As Mark Wrathall summarises it, Heidegger's thought was an attempt 'to reject the idea that there are entities, we know not what, existing as they are independently of the conditions under which they can manifest themselves'.²⁶⁷ For Gadamer, the basic ontological principle is not this practical horizon but rather the world-horizon of language. This horizon does not correspond to anything beyond it, and so cannot be adequate to anything; rather, it is what makes it possible for something to be one thing or another.²⁶⁸ It is this world-constituting function of language that is truth-as-aletheia, which is the concept of truth relating to hermeneutics.

²⁶⁶ See Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, p. 86-7. (Grondin seems to have changed his view in later essays, such as 'Metaphysical or Nihilistic ...')

²⁶⁷ Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Language, Truth, and History* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 1.

²⁶⁸ This was discussed in more detail in the second part of Chapter 1.

If this is correct, then it is not the case that there is a lingering element of the epistemological tradition in Gadamer's thought that he has failed to overcome; rather, Gadamer wavers between the domains of the phenomenological and the hermeneutical (and thus between *adequatio* and *aletheia*) – and failure to distinguish them (as Gadamer himself fails to) can lead to confusion.

2. Understanding and Interpretation

Let us now turn to understanding and interpretation. Understanding, Gadamer says, is a genuine experience (TM 483).²⁶⁹ On the closing page of the book, he declares:

[1] When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us. It has asserted itself and captivated us before we can come to ourselves and be in a position to test the claim to meaning that it makes. [...] In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe. Thus there is undoubtedly no understanding that is free of all prejudices, however much the will of our knowledge must be directed toward escaping their thrall. (TM 484)

We will need to attend carefully to this passage. The verb 'understand' in the first sentence is being used in a peculiar sense: not to indicate the completion of the process of understanding (its usual sense), but the *beginning* of it; it is not the completion of the concept, but the experience itself.²⁷⁰ We have to take it in this way if the second sentence is to make sense. We 'understand' in this sense when our prejudices have been brought into play such that the text can call them into

²⁶⁹ Here we pick up a thread I left off above, in discussing *Erfahrung* as productive of understanding.

²⁷⁰ Gadamer uses 'understanding' in a few different ways, which will be discussed below. The present sense of the term captures the way a work of art lays hold of us and leaves an impression, even when we cannot say precisely what it is that has captivated us (cf. Grondin, 'Play, Festival, and Ritual in Gadamer: On the theme of the immemorial in his later works', collected in Lawrence K. Schmidt (ed.), *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 52).

question, in a way that Gadamer has described earlier in the text: 'To interpret means precisely to bring one's own preconceptions into play so that the text's meaning can really be made to speak for us' (TM 398).²⁷¹ In this sense, understanding runs ahead of the rest of our intellectual capacities; it is the exercise of the understanding that enables a productive engagement to take place.²⁷² If we do not strive to engage in this way, to understand in this way, we run the risk of assimilating the text to our taken-for-granted interests, concerns and categories:

[2] the historian usually chooses concepts to describe the historical particularly of his objects without expressly reflecting on their origin and justification. He simply follows his interest in the material and takes no account of the fact that the descriptive concepts he chooses can be highly detrimental to his proper purpose if they assimilate what is historically different to what is familiar and thus, despite all impartiality, subordinate the alien being of the object to his own preconceptions. Thus, despite his scientific method, he behaves just like everyone else – as a child of his own time who is unquestioningly dominated by the concepts and prejudices of his own age. Insofar as the historian does not admit this naiveté to himself, he fails to reach the level of reflection that the subject matter demands. But his naiveté becomes truly abysmal when he starts to become aware of the problems it raises and so demands that in understanding history one must leave one's own concepts aside and think only in the concepts of the epoch one is trying to understand. (TM 397-8)

²⁷¹ To reiterate this important point, to understand and interpret a text means to allow it to call one's preconceptions into play. Jonathan Barnes thus has it completely backwards when he writes: 'The hermeneutical approach to philosophical texts is thus wholly egocentric: we read Plato in order to 'learn from him', in order to 'make his questions our own'; when we talk nominally about Aristotle we are really talking about ourselves. We do not particularly wish to learn about Plato. We are not interested in the fact that Aristotle's concerns were utterly different from our own.' Barnes seems not to have noticed that trying to 'make someone's questions our own' means first and foremost to work out what their questions are, and how they differ from our own. See Barnes, 'A Kind of Integrity', *London Review of Books*, 8, 19, pp. 12-13 [accessed online].

²⁷² We might compare William James on the relation between 'intuitions' and 'rationalism', *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Longmans Green & Co, 1943), pp. 72-3.

Understanding, then, comes first – then interpretation.²⁷³ This is the meaning of the second and third sentences in the passage we are considering [1]. The third sentence is puzzling: we ‘arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe’. If by this Gadamer means that it is pointless trying to engage critically, because before the critical faculties can be engaged we have already assimilated to the text and so have already changed our beliefs, then one of the standard critiques of him, that his account lacks a critical spirit, would be entirely appropriate. But I do not think this is would be an accurate characterisation of his thought. Rather, it is more productively read in light of the passage just cited [2] (which comes from TM III 1 [B]): if we want to understand something (in the usual sense), the first step must be to submit our preconceptions, concepts and categories to the question of the thing itself – it must first question us, before we question it. Discussing the limits of the parallel between ‘hermeneutical and philosophical dialectic’, Gadamer tells us:

[3] [T]he hermeneutical experience always includes the fact that the text to be understood speaks into a situation that is determined by previous opinions. The hermeneutical situation is not a regrettable distortion that affects the purity of understanding, but the condition of its possibility. Only because between the text and its interpreter there is not automatic accord can a hermeneutical experience make us share in the text. Only because a text has to be brought out of its alienness and assimilated is there anything for the person trying to understand it to say. Only because the text calls for it does interpretation take place, and only in the way called for. The apparently thetic beginning of interpretation is, in fact, a response; and the sense of the interpretation is determined, like every response, by the question asked. *Thus the dialectic of question and answer always precedes the*

²⁷³ So it is not sufficient to simply subsume one to the other, as in: ‘For Gadamer, understanding is always interpretation’ (Wiercinski, p. 13). While it is true that for Gadamer understanding (in the broad sense) is always interpretation (in the broad sense), we risk trivialising his thought to the level of post-modern banalities if we lose sight of the way his concepts actually relate to each other.

dialectic of interpretation. It is what determines understanding as an event. (TM 467)

Before the dialectic of interpretation can get going, there must be a dialectic of question and answer: in reading, I pose questions to the text, and the answers it gives will call into question those 'previous opinions' of mine; interpretation then proceeds as I try to make sense of these alien answers. If this first step is passed over, we end up naively assimilating the text to the way we ordinarily think, and unless we have some kind of warrant to believe that the way we ordinarily think is entirely correct, our understanding will be distorted. But, at the same time, we do not want to fall into the opposite error, of attempting to leap over our current concepts entirely, as though they could be bracketed out, and to take on only the concepts of the text. Not only is this impossible, it is not a desirable end, either, for two related reasons.²⁷⁴ The first, which Gadamer notes, is that in this way we psychologise the meaning of the text, rather than understanding it as *about* something, its *Sache*. The second, which Gadamer does not explicitly note, if we take on only the viewpoint of the text we lose the capacity to engage it critically.²⁷⁵

The final sentence of [1] recalls us to the role of prejudice in understanding. As I discussed in a previous chapter, prejudices are a somewhat ambiguous category in Gadamer's thought, but the meaning here is clear enough: without prejudices there is no understanding and no experience of things as we experience them (as he notes on TM 480, this is related to the finite nature of our experience); but nonetheless what is of real value is genuine experience that recalls us to the things themselves.

This structure of the hermeneutical experience, which so totally contradicts the idea of scientific methodology, itself depends on the

²⁷⁴ While Gadamer does not always make this explicit, that it is not a desirable *end* does not mean it is not sometimes a useful activity to undertake, as by making an effort to reconstruct the historical horizon of a text we can better call into question our own horizon.

²⁷⁵ There is perhaps a problem along these lines with Collingwood's account of how to uncover the question that a text is asking, in that a text winds up being the perfect answer to its own question. In this case, how can we engage the text critically? This point is raised in Bernard Williams's essay on Collingwood in *The Sense of the Past*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Princeton, 2006).

character of language as event that we have described at length. It is not just that the use and development of language is a process which has no single knowing and choosing consciousness standing over against it. (Thus it is literally more correct to say that language speaks us, rather than that we speak it [...].) A more important point is the one to which we have constantly referred, namely that what constitutes the hermeneutical event proper is not language as language, whether as grammar or as lexicon; it consists in the coming into language of what has been said in the tradition: an event that is at once appropriation and interpretation. Thus here it really is true to say that this event is not our action upon the thing, but the act of the thing itself. (TM 459)

The coming-into-language over which we have no control: this is the truth event. Gadamer, in this passage, is particularly concerned with the way the tradition is forever coming afresh into the language of the present; this is because, as the opening words make clear, he is thinking here of what goes on in hermeneutical experience – which, as we have said, is that sub-species of genuine experience concerned with the way we find ourselves addressed by an interlocutor (the tradition, for the hermeneuticist, is just one interlocutor among others, albeit the most important one).

But there is more to be said about the truth event. We have distinguished between the phenomenological and the hermeneutical tendencies of Gadamer's account of truth, and the truth event can take place on either or both levels. This is something Gadamer does not give any explicit attention to, but we can explicate it as follows.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ Some other commentators pick up on this distinction, but do not elaborate on it. Thus Bernet says of the truth event: 'For a game to have truth value, the disclosure of the meaning of this world of human life must form the horizon and the ultimate stake of the truth put into play by a particular thing' – this is a hermeneutical truth event. He goes on to say: 'Inversely, there is truth value in any game which shifts a thing into a new context, thereby showing it to be different than we thought' – this is a phenomenological truth event. (See Bernet, 'Gadamer on the Subject's Participation in the Game of Truth', p. 799.)

At the phenomenological level, the truth event is the presentation of the thing to me such that it issues a challenge to my understanding of it. So, for example, my friend might do something I think reprehensible: on the basis of my understanding of him, I take his failure to fulfil some important commitment to be due to some private whim – he has, in the past, failed to fulfil other commitments because he just did not feel like it at the time, and so on. But when I challenge him, he tells me something about his relation to that commitment – perhaps it was made under duress, or there is some private reason why fulfilling that commitment would be intensely painful for him, or so on. This discovery then puts him into a new light: I see that what appeared to be a reprehensible failure is actually no such thing; perhaps, if the revelation he provides is deep enough, it will also lead me to see a whole range of things he has done in the past in a different light. Thus the truth event is this moment in which what I had taken to be the truth about my friend is shown to be mistaken, and my friend (‘the thing itself’) presents himself as other than what I had taken him to be.

Alternatively, something might be revealed as corresponding to its concept. In his essay, ‘On the contribution of poetry to the search for truth’, Gadamer notes the way we use the expression “true friend”: ‘We mean by this that someone has proved himself or herself to be a friend and not simply given us the impression of friendly support and sympathy. It has emerged this is a real friend. [...] It can also be put this way: when we say “a true friend”, we mean that here the word accords with its concept. This man actually corresponds with the concept of a friend.’²⁷⁷ There are two things going on at the phenomenological level, then: my understanding of someone/something may correspond better or worse to that person/thing; and that person/thing may correspond better or worse to the concept in light of which it is understood (or it may turn out to be better understood in light of a different conceptual horizon).

At the hermeneutical level, the truth event could occur in two different ways. The first is when some particular concept is unfolded. In discussing Hegel’s dialectic, Gadamer uses the example of the concept of justice (TM 463).²⁷⁸ A reversal takes place, he notes, when we realise that in some cases by pursuing

²⁷⁷ RB 108.

²⁷⁸ This is a passage we will discuss below.

justice too thoroughly we can thwart justice (the principle of *summum ius summa iniuria*). Suppose that we take justice to be the impartial application of law: anyone who breaks the law, must face the consequences. Two people steal some bread: the first, a wealthy woman, who steals because she is a miser; the second, a destitute woman, who steals because otherwise she will starve to death. To apply the law against theft to the first woman would be to punish her for an act freely committed; but to apply the law to the second woman would be to punish her for an act committed out of desperation, as a result of being in a situation that she was probably only in (given the kind of society in which we live) due to structural injustices in the first place – it would be to perpetuate injustice. Thus the truth event in this case is the realisation that the concept of justice is not so straightforward as I had taken it to be.

The second way takes place when I come to see that the concepts by which I make sense of the world are in some way contingent. This is different to the case of the concept of justice just discussed, because in that case it was not a matter of a different concept of justice coming into view, but the unfolding of one and the same concept. Such a hermeneutical project is the one pursued by Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self*, in which Taylor attempts to trace part of the history of our sense of self, to show the way certain elements of it – our sense of interiority, of the value of ordinary life, of our connection with nature – are not simply given but have come to be through our contingent history. By doing so he throws elements of our horizon into sharp relief, and shows that they need not *necessarily* be the way they are. Our conception of the good life consisting of (or at least according an important place to) a contented private life, for example, is not one that would have made much sense to the Greeks.²⁷⁹ Now, the point of such a project is not to allow us to pick and choose between different conceptions, but rather to throw *our* conceptions into relief so that we can get a better grasp of them, for the sake of being better able to unfold, develop or criticise them (like in the case of justice above).²⁸⁰ Even if we do not (even

²⁷⁹ Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1998).

²⁸⁰ Raymond Geuss has suggested that, since our political world is in a significant sense *constituted* by the kinds of political concepts we have (in the hermeneutical sense I have been discussing), one of the tasks of political philosophy might be ‘conceptual innovation’ – the development of conceptual resources by which we can better make sense of the world we live in

though we do not) buy the Hegelian line that concepts can be worked out with a kind of immanent necessity, nonetheless we can only move to new conceptions on the basis of where we are;²⁸¹ and sometimes we might show that a wrong turn has been taken at some historical juncture, that we might be best advised to try to think through an alternative line of development.²⁸²

We need now to distinguish between the truth event, as I have been applying the term to Gadamer's thought, and a related concept that Heidegger employs, which we may designate 'the happening of truth'.²⁸³ The happening of truth, for Heidegger, is the way in which the work of art 'opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force' (p. 44; emphasis in original). The world in question is not the totality of given objects but rather the background against which they can appear as what they are (previously we designated this the hermeneutical 'horizon'). The happening of truth is the opening up of this world, and its remaining open; it is an ongoing event within which everything we do takes place. Where this differs from Gadamer's conception of the (hermeneutical) truth event is in its temporality. The happening of truth is an ongoing event in which we all stand; the truth event is that flash in which things change, and a rebuke or challenge is issued to see things anew. To put that another way: the happening of truth is an ongoing event in which things are sustained; the truth event is a single moment in which things are changed. This brings out a further, implicit contrast. For Heidegger, the Greek temple sets up a world, giving people their outlook and letting things appear as what they are; perhaps, if the people stray from that outlook the temple might offer a silent rebuke and recall them to who they are; and eventually that world passes away – presumably because the temple's call and rebuke was not heeded.²⁸⁴ But this way of thinking about history has no

and the problems it faces, which (if successful) is tantamount to changing that world. See his *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, 2008), pp. 42ff.

²⁸¹ A similar project is pursued by Alasdair MacIntyre in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, 1988), in which he also takes seriously the question of how debates between rival traditions might be resolved on the basis of where they are.

²⁸² Taylor argues for this, with regard to Descartes, in his contribution to Rorty, Schneewind & Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge, 1984); and Quentin Skinner argues along these lines, with regard to the defeat of the 'republican conception of liberty', in the final division of *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2012).

²⁸³ The following discussion draws primarily from 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*.

²⁸⁴ Cf. Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 52-60. My summary is intentionally coarse, so as to make the contrast with Gadamer stark; Young rightly emphasises

place for change, only loss; the world does not develop, but passes away. Gadamer's conception of history is inherently developmental: the past is constantly being appropriated and reinterpreted in the light of the changing present. The conversation that we are in is ongoing; the very structure of *Truth and Method* is not that of destruction and return, but of an ongoing conversation with an entire tradition, with the goal of issuing a challenge to further think through what it means to have historical consciousness.

So we now have a grasp on the truth event, truth-as-adequatio and truth-as-aletheia. But what, for Gadamer, is an interpretation? As we have seen, the truth event happens prior to our making sense of it; and an interpretation is an attempt to make sense of something. So we will need to explore the relation between the two.

Every interpretation is bound to its hermeneutical situation, he says (TM 398); but this does not make it private and subjective:

Being bound by a situation does not mean that the claim to correctness that every interpretation must make is dissolved into the subjective or the occasional. [...] Interpretation [...] is the act of understanding itself, which is realised – not just for the one for whom one is interpreting but also for the interpreter himself – in the explicitness of verbal interpretation. Thanks to the verbal nature of all interpretation, every interpretation includes the possibility of a relationship with others. (TM 399)

The crucial point of this passage occurs in the second sentence: interpretation is not distinct from understanding, but is rather an 'act' of it. He emphasises this point: '[I]ntepretation is not a means through which understanding is achieved; rather, it enters into the content of what is understood' (TM 399). Here he is echoing Heidegger, who in *Being and Time* claims that an interpretation is

that for Heidegger the life of a community consists not in sticking unchangingly to 'how things are done', but in reinterpreting and reappropriating their history and practices. However, my point is that, for Heidegger, history is by and large the history of fall and forgetting, which is not how Gadamer sees it (his 'forgetting of language' thesis notwithstanding).

understanding becoming itself.²⁸⁵ What does this mean? The best way to make sense of it, it seems to me, is to distinguish between interpretation and understanding as being ‘more or less articulate’ (to use Charles Taylor’s phrase) modes of the same thing, our capacity to understand. Our ordinary understanding of something, while linguistic, is usually not very articulate. As we saw in the previous section, understanding occurs, for Gadamer, not when I ‘fully’ understand something but when I have an initial grasp of it. This usually strikes us when someone asks us to explain something to them that we usually feel like we understand perfectly well: in trying to find the words for it we struggle, and often end up in hindsight dissatisfied with the result and feeling like we have distorted the thing we are trying to explain. What we have offered is an interpretation, which has been drawn from our experiences and our understanding of the thing; but in attempting to articulate our understanding (in interpretation), we come to realise that we do not understand it so well as we supposed: both our interpretation and our understanding may be improved through subsequent reflection or attempts at articulating it; but the aim is not to divorce it from our understanding of the thing (which is in turn not divorced from the thing), and so be left with a freestanding interpretation – or, as Gadamer puts it, ‘interpretation that was correct in itself would be a foolish ideal’ (TM 398).²⁸⁶ He further observes:

The verbal explicitness that understanding achieves through interpretation does not create a second sense apart from what is understood and interpreted. The interpretive concepts are not, as such, thematic in understanding. Rather, it is their nature to disappear behind what they bring to speech in interpretation. Paradoxically, an interpretation is right when it is capable of disappearing in this way. And yet at the same time it must be expressed as something that is supposed to disappear. The possibility of understanding is dependent

²⁸⁵ BT 188.

²⁸⁶ He finishes this sentence ‘... that mistook the nature of tradition’. But he cannot mean to limit the application of his insight only to the interpretation of tradition; the very idea of an interpretation that could be definitive, and would absolve us of ever needing to return to the thing it is an interpretation of, would run against the grain of Gadamer’s whole philosophy.

on the possibility of this kind of mediating interpretation [*Auslegung*].
(TM 399)

This passage is central to the interpretation of Gadamer's philosophy. The central insight is that an interpretation that 'stands out' or otherwise calls attention to itself as an interpretation is, to that extent, inadequate to its purpose, which is to express the *Sache*, the thing it is an interpretation of. This is Gadamer's concept of truth-as-fittingness.²⁸⁷

From what we have said thus far, we can draw out the dialectical structure of the relationship between understanding and interpretation in the following way. Prior to offering an interpretation, we have a more or less articulate understanding of the thing; in offering an interpretation, we both express this understanding and at the same time sense the inadequacy of the interpretation to our understanding. This inadequacy, when we notice it and are attentive to it (as we often, but not always, are), is uncomfortable; and is finally overcome when we manage to 'find the words' to express it more adequately. In this reconciliation, not only does our interpretation become more adequate to our understanding, but our understanding has also been developed by being articulated (in the sense of having been put into words) – our understanding has been articulated, we could say (in the sense of having been elaborated or spelled out). This reconciliation is not ever final, of course: in light of new experiences, or in light of new questions, we once again find ourselves in the position of having to articulate our understanding.²⁸⁸

Thus we see the relation between understanding and interpretation. An interpretation is not a separate thing to our understanding, but is instead both an expression of it and, in the dialectical relation between the two, an elaboration and articulation of it.

²⁸⁷ For a discussion of this concept of truth in Gadamer, and its relation to Gadamer's reading of Plato, see Risser (2002), 'Hermeneutics and the Appearing Word: Gadamer's Debt to Plato', *Studia Phaenomenologica* II, 1, 2, esp. pp. 226ff.

²⁸⁸ The dialectical relation between understanding and interpretation is replicated in the relationship between the truth event and truth-as-fittingness, as is noted by Healy, among others ('Truth and Relativism', p. 295).

But there is an ambivalence in the concept of understanding, which we need to tease out. When discussing understanding by itself, in connection with *Erfahrung* and the truth event, it seemed that understanding was the immediate grasp of the as-yet-not-fully-realised insight. But when discussing it in connection with interpretation, it wavered between this sense – where interpretation is the working out of a new insight (e.g. TM 484) – and another sense – in which interpretation is the articulation of an implicit understanding (e.g. TM 399).

This latter sense has clear roots in Heidegger's thought. In §§31-2 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger lays out a distinction between understanding and interpretation (*Auslegung*). Understanding, for Heidegger, is one of the primordial existential structures of *Dasein*: its understanding consists in the way it understands itself as faced with such-and-such possibilities, and understands itself (in a pre-theoretical way) in relation to these possibilities as things it *can* or *cannot* do: '*Dasein* is such that in every case it has understood (or alternatively, not understood) what it is to be thus or thus' (p. 184); 'as understanding, *Dasein* projects its Being upon possibilities' (p. 188).

This understanding, we have said, is 'pre-theoretical' – we could put it another way, and say that it is not yet *articulate*, it does not yet *understand itself*. But understanding can develop itself: 'this development of the understanding we call "interpretation" ' (p. 188). Interpretation, for Heidegger, is grounded in understanding, and is the working out of its possibilities. It is also involved in our encounter with the world ('We never perceive equipment that is ready-to-hand without already understanding and interpreting it', p. 190): everything we encounter has some involvement with the world, which is disclosed by understanding; and the working out of this involvement is done by interpretation (p. 191). Understanding and interpretation are closely bound up with Heidegger's concept of 'fore-having' and the 'as-structure' of experience, as we discussed above in relation to Gadamer's concept of prejudice.

There is, I think, one level on which Gadamer simply wants to follow Heidegger in this, in particular in the domain of 'ordinary experience'. But his concept of *Erfahrung*, and the accompanying account of understanding, represents a break with Heidegger, and a substantive one at that. Rather than understanding being the basic mode of my experience, that which underlies my

capacity to find my way around in the world and to orient myself towards various projects and possibilities, understanding is a disorienting and disruptive event, like the Platonic Idea of the Beautiful, which lays hold of me before I realise what is happening; the accompanying concept of interpretation, is not the 'laying out' and articulation of understanding, but instead an after-the-fact attempt to make sense of what was disclosed to me in the event of understanding.²⁸⁹

There are three senses of the verb 'to understand' relevant to Gadamer's thought, and so far we have discussed two of them: there is understanding as my capacity to 'find my way around' (as in Heidegger's *Being and Time*), there is the event of understanding (which I have argued represents a break with Heidegger); and finally there is understanding as reaching an agreement in conversation. It is this final sense that commentators often take as primary for Gadamer, and there is no doubt that it is important – coming to an agreement is, for him, the aim of conversation. But while it is important, it is not primary; if it is taken by itself, it leads us astray.

Without reference to the *Sache*, dialogue is reduced to a free-wheeling conversation between two people who are trying to agree *with* each other, but not *about* anything. The dialogue, that is, loses its 'rigor', unswerving concern for the thing in question.²⁹⁰ We can make better sense of Gadamer's notion of conversation, and the fusion of horizons, if we take his account of understanding as being *about* something, and his account of hermeneutic experience, as fundamental to it.

In the chapter on *Erfahrung*, Gadamer tells us that genuine conversation means putting oneself in play, which means being open to having one's prejudices called into question: 'Hermeneutical consciousness culminates [...] in

²⁸⁹ Dostal argues that the difference between Heidegger's and Gadamer's concepts of truth rests in the latter's emphasis on dialogue and 'taking time' where Heidegger stresses the 'sudden flash' (although he also points out that sometimes Gadamer uses the language of 'sudden flashes' as well). What I am arguing is that, for Gadamer, 'taking time' (truth-as-fittingness) and the 'sudden flash' (the truth event) are intimately linked. See his 'The Experience of Truth in Gadamer and Heidegger: Taking Time and Sudden Lightning', collected in Wachterhauser (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Truth*.

²⁹⁰ This is where Wiercinski's account goes wrong: see again Wiercinski 'Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience', p. 11, quoted above.

the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma' (TM 355). In the following chapter, on dialogue, it becomes clear that dialogue is not an attempt on the part of one speaker to get clear on what the other speaker means, but rather an exchange of question and answer, since 'discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question' (TM 357).

We can put these points in terms of the foregoing explication of Gadamer's concept of genuine experience and of understanding. Prior to a dialogue, I have some kind of more-or-less worked out understanding (in the sense of 'being able to find my way around', my settled view) of something or other; otherwise, I could not have a dialogue about it. When someone engages me in discussion about it, in order to have a genuine dialogue I must be open to their calling my perspective into question. A good question will render the thing under consideration puzzling or questionable to me in a way that *it was not before*; this is both the genuine experience, the *Erfahrung* that lets me see the thing in a new light *and* the moment of understanding in which my previous understanding (settled view) is disrupted and I am not yet sure how to incorporate this new insight into my understanding (new settled view) of the thing. With the thing freshly questionable, the conversation proceeds on the basis of trying to work out an interpretation of the thing.

And so we have Gadamer's concept of truth. Its hidden four-fold nature has caused much debate and confusion, but once the relevant distinctions are made one can see how it fits together. The question remains, however, whether or not its lack of unity is a virtue or a failing. One might be tempted to say that Gadamer does not have a concept of truth, but rather leaves it undefined and thus winds up bouncing between four different unrelated ideas in an undisciplined fashion; if only he'd thought through the question of truth, he would have tightened the concept up rather than leaving it floating. But against this it can be noted that the four concepts are systematically inter-related, as can be seen from the foregoing exposition: the four concepts fall into two pairs, and each pair corresponds to another important concept from his hermeneutics (phenomenology and hermeneutics; understanding and interpretation); and the idea of the 'truth

event', which is closely related to the genuine experience, serves as the gravitational centre around which the other three concepts cluster. The virtue of not insisting on a unitary concept of truth is that what matters about truth varies in different contexts: what matters in a representational context is how well one thing corresponds to another, as when we want to know whether this picture is a true likeness; but what matters about the concept of justice is not how well it corresponds to something else, but how well its internal content has been developed. In some contexts, what matters is an account of truth that allows us to grasp the historical character of something like the self or the state, where it is partially constituted by the language in which it is understood; and in others, we want to know how well our understanding measures against the thing itself. In not insisting on a one-size-fits-all concept of truth, Gadamer is being true to his hermeneutical roots by not trying to determine a concept without an eye to its application.

V - The Limits of *Erfahrung*

Having now set out Gadamer's concept of experience and its relations to other central concepts, we will now examine what I take to be two interconnected and crucial weaknesses of it. The first is that *Erfahrung* is an unstable and disruptive kind of experience, which becomes a problem when it is prized in the way Gadamer prizes it; the upshot of this is that it cannot make adequate sense of conviction, which it can only see as an inadequacy. The second is that hermeneutics cannot ultimately provide an account of what matters – and why hermeneutics itself matters. I will then attempt a tentative reconciliation that finds a way to retain Gadamer's insights into genuine experience without reducing its power and force.

Before we proceed, a comment about method: in the following, I have endeavoured to use literary examples as often as possible. The primary reason for this is neatly captured by Bernard Williams: 'In seeking a reflective understanding of ethical life,' he says, '[...] [philosophy] quite often takes examples from literature. Why not take examples from life? It is a perfectly good question, and it has a short answer: what philosophers will lay before themselves and their readers as an alternative to literature will not be life, but bad literature.'²⁹¹ Unless one possesses a novelists' skill, examples drawn from one's own life will almost always fall flat on the page, no matter how interesting or important they are to oneself; and there is a further danger: the 'genuine experiences' one winds up producing will simply reflect one's own experience and priorities – while one's choice of literary examples will still reflect this, it is at one remove; literature offers a far richer, more diverse source. In any case, as Kathleen Wright has written, 'Gadamer *insists* on merging philosophy and literature [...]. For Gadamer [...] literature and philosophy do not meet now for the first time "at the crossroads", but instead *cross* each other constantly – for he knows that, ever since Plato, theirs is a "lovers' quarrel".'²⁹²

²⁹¹ *Shame and Necessity* (California, 1993), p. 13.

²⁹² Wright, 'Literature and Philosophy at the Crossroads', collected in Wright (ed.), *Festivals of Interpretation* (SUNY, 1990), p. 245.

1. *Erfahrung* and Conviction

The concept of 'genuine experience' [*Erfahrung*] Gadamer has uncovered is an important one. He insists on the way things are deeper and richer than our concepts can get a hold of, and he succeeds in elucidating the way our ordinary way of understanding something tends to conceal it as well as reveal it – his emphasis on genuine experience is precisely an emphasis on the kind of experience that brings the concealed dimensions of something to light. It is noteworthy that, in the same decade, Adorno published *Negative Dialectics* (1966), a book that also stresses the need to reveal 'the determinable flaw in every concept' (in Adorno's expression),²⁹³ to 'break through that which controls our entire thinking and knowing like a closed and impermeable layer of smoothed-over opinions' (in Gadamer's expression).²⁹⁴ A major distinction between the two books, however, is that Adorno sees this need not so much as a perennial issue as directly arising from contemporary social conditions; he speaks of 'social conditions' that 'prune and often cripple the forces of mental productivity', and calls on those who are 'not quite adjusted to prevailing norms' 'to make the moral and, as it were, representative effort to say what most of those for whom they say it cannot see or, to do justice to reality, will not allow themselves to see'.²⁹⁵ One does not get the impression that Adorno thinks this kind of activity will make one well adjusted, whereas Gadamer attempts to tame and normalise it. However, his concept of genuine experience resists these attempts.

In the central passages on genuine experience, Gadamer tells us that the result of genuine experience is to produce somebody who has 'learned through suffering' (Aeschylus) to be 'radically undogmatic'. The idea is that having one's conceptual horizon broken and remade gradually makes it more flexible; and the eventual product is someone whose character has forged stability from this instability – just as flexible material suffers less damage from an impact, so a flexible horizon suffers less disruption from a genuine experience. This is not

²⁹³ *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Seabury, 1973), p. 53.

²⁹⁴ 'What is truth?', p. 42.

²⁹⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 41. See also Axel Honneth's essay 'Performing Justice', collected in his *Pathologies of Reason* (Columbia, 2006).

wrong – the very idea of a liberal education is (rightly) founded on the view that having one’s intellectual horizons broadened is good for the mind, and having one’s unreflective prejudices called into question makes one more reflective – but it does not think the issue all of the way through.²⁹⁶

The model for Gadamer here is clear – he has in mind a broadly Aristotelian account of the virtues. For Aristotle, to have the virtues means (among other things) to have a character that is appropriately responsive to the world around it: the virtue corresponding to anger, for example, is the mean between being over-responsive (flying into a rage at the slightest provocation) and under-responsive (remaining entirely impassive). To have the virtues is to be able to respond adequately to the disruptions that life throws at you without being too disrupted yourself. The upshot of this is a harmonious and largely self-sufficient personality. Similarly, for Gadamer to become ‘radically undogmatic’ is to have the virtue of being adequately responsive to genuine experience.

What causes trouble for this model is that genuine experiences are *by their nature* disruptive and un-harmonious. Contrary to the image of the Gadamerian *phronimos*, genuine experience cannot be incorporated so hastily into the Aristotelian model. Since genuine experience is unstable and unpredictable, as himself Gadamer notes, you cannot determine in advance *when* it will happen, or *what* will be called into question when it does; and anybody who prioritised genuine experience in the way Gadamer suggests may well become ‘radically undogmatic’, but they would also lack stable priorities: their priority has become constantly redrawing their horizon by calling into question of their priorities.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ A similar objection has been mounted by Decker (2000), ‘The Limits of Radical Openness: Gadamer on Socratic Dialectic and Plato’s Idea of the Good’, *Symposium*, IV, 1, pp. 5-32. Decker raises concerns over what he calls the privileging of *elenchus* over ‘consensus formation’ (see p. 22) – it is interesting to note that, while his position differs from my own, both are opposed to the idea that Gadamer privileges ‘coming to an agreement’ over interruption (recall Bernasconi’s objections, discussed above).

²⁹⁷ Nietzsche noted this long ago: ‘Everyone has made at least this one simple observation: a human being’s historical knowledge and sensitivity can be very limited, his horizon as narrow as that of the inhabitant of an isolated alpine valley; each of his judgments may contain an injustice, each experience may be marked by a misconception that he is the first to experience it – yet in spite of all these injustices and all these misconceptions, he stands there, vigorously healthy and robust, a joy to look at. At the same time, someone standing close beside him who is far more just and learned grows sick and collapses because the lines of his horizon are restlessly redrawn again and again, because he cannot extricate himself from the much more fragile web of his justice and his truths and find his way back to crude wanting and desiring.’ (‘On the Utility and

The virtue thus becomes a vice. It might be the mean between unreflective commitment to one's own views and scepticism, but it does not seem productive of a good human life. The 'radically undogmatic' *phronimos* can easily be distinguished from the sceptic, since the sceptic does their utmost to avoid affirming any proposition or its negation,²⁹⁸ while the Gadamerian *phronimos* may well affirm certain views. It is just that, if they really take *Erfahrung* to be the highest type of experience – 'genuine' experience – then their priority is always to bring these affirmations into play so that they can be called into question. In other words, Gadamer's account cannot make any sense of conviction – or of the psychological toll that can be wrought by genuine experience.

Conviction can mean two very different things. I can have a conviction in the sense of unswervingly holding to some particular belief, regardless of any evidence you might present to the contrary. Alternatively, I can have the conviction that something is *important*, that something *matters*, and this is not reducible to a belief about some state of affairs. It is, in fact, an entirely hermeneutical matter, since to have a conviction that something is important is to organise one's experience in a certain way.²⁹⁹ If I have a conviction that caramelised onion is an essential accompaniment to a barbecued sausage, then any sausage that lacks caramelised onion can only be a bitter disappointment, no matter how good the sausage on its own terms; likewise, if I have a conviction that preserving the natural world is important, then arguments that this will hamper economic growth are not particularly going to move me even if they are entirely correct; or, if I have a conviction that economic growth is the ultimate

Liability of History for Life', trans. R. Gray, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, volume 2 [Stanford, 1995], pp. 90-91.)

²⁹⁸ I have in mind ancient, not modern, scepticism. Jonathan Barnes makes a slightly different distinction between what he calls 'modest' or 'wary' scepticism and hermeneutic 'openness'. While his account of 'modest scepticism' strikes me as a slightly platitudinous piece of liberal self-congratulation ('A sceptic recognises that he himself may always be wrong. [...] A modest sceptic may have little hope that he has discovered the true answer to any question: but he may for all that be sure that he has uncovered several false answers. [...] He will not set up his own standard with any great conviction. But with some opponents he will not be 'open': he will be quite sure that they are wrong'), he makes criticisms of Gadamer's position that are similar to my own, although he develops them in a different direction. See Barnes, 'A Kind of Integrity', *London Review of Books*, 8, 19, pp. 12-13 [accessed online].

²⁹⁹ This is precisely how Gadamer defines what it means to have a horizon: to have a horizon is to know 'the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small' (TM 301-2).

goal of politics, then I might be saddened that deregulating an industry will cause disruption for thousands of families but it will seem to me an unfortunate effect of a goal that is still ultimately worth pursuing. MacIntyre notes that convictions are an essential part of having a 'moral character', connected with the virtue he calls 'constancy': 'constancy requires that those who possess it pursue the same goods through extended periods of time, not allowing the requirements of changing social contexts to distract them from their commitments'.³⁰⁰ One does not always choose one's convictions: more often, we find ourselves with them. For Charles Taylor, our conceptions of the good – on the basis of which we render those 'strong evaluations' that partially constitute who we are – are a matter of convictions we find ourselves with, not a matter of free choice.³⁰¹

Gadamer's account of understanding as prejudice-laden is in fact the perfect model for grasping the role of convictions. Just as our understanding of things is always shot through with prejudices, and adequately understanding understanding means grasping why this is no bad thing, so is it also shot through with convictions. Indeed, a conviction may well be a kind of prejudice: a prejudice that such-and-such matters, that thus-and-so is important. Adorno's project in *Negative Dialectics*, for instance, is shot through with commitments: first and foremost that the modern world is a miserable, bureaucratised place, and that the most important task is to resist it becoming the closed totality it is ever more closely approximating. Without a commitment of this kind, his project makes no sense. Adorno expresses another, and closely related, commitment when he says, at the end of *Minima Moralia*, that only in the light of hope is knowledge possible – I take it that at least part of the meaning of this is that any adequate understanding of social conditions has to avoid appealing to the standards inherent to those social conditions, although we cannot know from our position what the better standards are: only in the light of hope can the contemporary world be seen for how wretched it is.

³⁰⁰ MacIntyre, 'Social Structures and their Threats to Agency', in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 193.

³⁰¹ See Taylor, 'Self-interpreting animals' collected in his *Human Agency and Language*. See also Arto Laitinen, 'MacIntyre and Taylor: Traditions, Rationality, and Modernity', in Malpas and Gander (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, p. 210.

Since Gadamer has given a powerful argument that prejudices are always present in understanding, we should also expect to find something so fundamental as a conviction in his account. As it turns out, Gadamer's hermeneutics does indeed smuggle in a conviction. Hermeneutics is an exploration of the structure of experience and a phenomenological account of how understanding is a process and an event; but it takes for granted that understanding others is something worth doing – and it smuggles this conviction in, it does not contain an argument for it. This conviction is laudable, but not neutral – and in terms of its priorities for ethical life, an ethics that has understanding the other as its centre, that places a premium on coming to an understanding above all else, winds up arriving at some form of liberalism.³⁰² Gadamer's image of the *phronimos* – particularly as he appears in the chapter on experience – is a liberal who fears dogmatism as the worst kind of character flaw. But praising the un-dogmatic *without* an account of conviction fails to understand the way moral convictions function; it is to treat *all* conviction as dogmatic, as oppressive, as a barrier to genuine conversation. (Really this is just a rehearsal of Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice.) My conviction that the first priority of politics is to ensure that no person is starving or exploited (or, as Adorno put it, that there be no more starvation, torture or Auschwitz)³⁰³ is not something that I am interested in trying to call into question; if I went about actively seeking challenge to this conviction this could only suggest that I were not particularly serious about it, or were perhaps too attached to the appearance of liberal open-mindedness. It is entirely possible, of course, that some experiences will challenge this conviction, or that somebody may convince me to abandon it – but, from my present perspective, this would be a fall into disillusionment and nihilism, not consciousness-expanding enlightenment. It is not clear why I should pursue this, or treat its pursuit as a virtue.³⁰⁴

³⁰² I will discuss what this ascription of 'liberalism' might mean in Ch. 5 §2.

³⁰³ Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, trans. R. Livingston (Belknap Press, 2008), p. 338. Cf. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §100.

³⁰⁴ Terry Eagleton has put this point far more eloquently, with regard to his Marxist and Christian commitments: 'There are those nowadays who would regard faith in socialism as even more eccentric than the exotic conviction that the Blessed Virgin Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven. Why, then, do some of us still cling to this political faith, in the teeth of what many would regard as reason and solid evidence? Not only, I think, because socialism is such an extraordinarily good idea that it has proved exceedingly hard to discredit, and this despite its

The concept of genuine experience and its limitations can also be illuminated by contrast with a pair of alternative movements of the spirit, as identified by Nietzsche. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (§230), Nietzsche describes ‘the fundamental will of the spirit’:

The commanding something that is called “the spirit” by the people wants to be master in and around itself and to feel like the master: it has the will to simplicity out of multiplicity, a binding, subduing, dominating and truly masterful will. Its needs and capacities here are the same as those physiologists posit for everything that lives, grows and multiplies. The power of the spirit to appropriate the foreign reveals itself in a strong inclination to assimilate the new to the old, to simplify the manifold, and to overlook or repulse whatever is utterly contradictory: just as it arbitrarily stresses, selects and gorges into shape certain features and lines of the foreign, of every piece of “external world.” Its intention in all this is to incorporate new “experience,” to classify new things under old classifications – thus growth itself; more specifically, the *feeling* of growth, the feeling of increased power. An apparently opposite drive serves this same will, a suddenly erupting resolution to ignorance, to arbitrarily locking up, a closing of its windows, an inner No-saying to this or any thing, a do-not-approach-me, a kind of defensive state against much that is knowable, a complacency with darkness, with the closed-in horizon, a Yes-saying and approval of ignorance: as all this is necessary depending on the degree of its appropriating force, its “digestive

own most strenuous efforts. It is also because one cannot accept that this – the world we see groaning in agony around us – is the only way things could be, though empirically speaking this might certainly prove to be the case; because one gazes with wondering bemusement on those hard-headed types for whom all this, given a reformist tweak or two, is as good as it gets; because to back down from this vision would be to betray what one feels are the most precious powers and capacities of human beings; because however hard one tries, one cannot simply shake off the primitive conviction that *this is not how it is supposed to be*, however much we are conscious that this seeing the world in the light of Judgment Day, as Walter Benjamin might put it, is folly to financiers and a stumbling block to stockbrokers; because there is something in this vision which calls to the depths of one’s being and evokes a passionate assent there; because not to feel this would not be oneself; because one is too much in love with this vision of humankind to back down, walk away, or take no for an answer.’ (*Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, pp. 122-123.)

force” to speak metaphorically – and indeed “the spirit” most resembles a stomach.³⁰⁵

I quote at length, because Nietzsche speaks best in his own words, and because the passage makes its point with striking compression. The spirit, he says, ‘most resembles a stomach’: and the two movements he describes here are digestive ones. The first is that of assimilating the foreign, incorporating new experiences into existing categories and thus imposing order on what was disordered; the second is a kind of digestive rejection, a no-saying to new experiences because the ‘digestive force’ to incorporate and order them is lacking. The former is associated with strength, while the latter is a sign of decline. But what is striking about the passage is what it leaves out: the movement Gadamer is most interested in when it comes to genuine experience is the transformative power of generating *new* categories to incorporate new material.

That Nietzsche leaves this out tells us something about his interests in this passage. It is not that Nietzsche is unaware that our concepts can be transformed, or that this transformation can be of deep importance – his book *On the Genealogy of Morality* is concerned with the transformation of various concepts, his own avowed project of the ‘revaluation of values’ involves conceptual transformation, and in the very next section of *Beyond Good and Evil* he declares: ‘Learning transforms us.’ But this next section also gives us a hint, for there he declares that despite these transformations, at the bottom of each character is a ‘granite of spiritual *fatum*’, which is ‘unteachable’ and the source of our ‘convictions’; our convictions lead us to the ‘problem that we are’ – or: ‘to the great stupidity that we are’. This last formulation serves as a nice contrast with Gadamer’s expression (adapted from Hölderlin), ‘the conversation that we are’, and it serves to highlight what is at stake in Gadamer’s concept of genuine experience. To the extent that we are a conversation, there is nothing that is clearly immutable: while we might sometimes shield our deepest convictions, on the Gadamerian model of dialogue the goal is to have these convictions brought into play so they can be called into question. For Nietzsche this is hopelessly optimistic: you cannot budge the ‘granite of spiritual *fatum*’ any more than you

³⁰⁵ *Beyond Good and Evil / On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Stanford, 2014).

can leap over your own shadow. At a certain level, the spirit stops being plastic: and from that point, one either digests new experiences into existing categories, or one rejects new experiences and refuses to acknowledge them.

Gadamer seems here to be unduly optimistic, while Nietzsche is perhaps too pessimistic. If people are capable of transforming even their deepest convictions through dialogue, as Gadamer seems to suggest – and his model of the ‘radically undogmatic’ man of experience seems to be someone who has been purged of deeply held convictions – the human world does not show much evidence of it. Rather, the world would seem to evidence Nietzsche’s position, that at their core people will be intractably attracted to certain positions, and there is no hope of reconciling these through rational dialogue. However, and this is where Gadamer’s concept of genuine experience is illuminating, it is always possible that my experiences will eventually shatter my most deeply held beliefs – it is just that the result will likely not be that I become radically undogmatic but rather that I enter into a kind of crisis, and if the dust does finally settle there is no guarantee that the result is that I will henceforth be more open to new experience: I might settle dogmatically on a new view (as the stereotype goes of the committed Marxist who in the 1980s became a Thatcherite), or I might just become suspicious of my capacity for judgement. But, regardless of the indeterminacy of the outcome, it is not at all clear that there is an unchangeable core to my character (as Nietzsche seems to think) – it is just that it may need to be broken to be remade, and there is no way to be sure that this remaking is always possible, or that its remaking will always be good for me. Sometimes I may need to resist something, in the face of experience, in order to sustain myself.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ This is the situation of the titular character of Nabokov’s *Pnin*: ‘In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin – not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind [...] but because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible. One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one’s lips in the dusk of the past.’ (*Novels 1955-1962*, p. 394)

2. Hermeneutics as Ethics

The question is one of the relation between hermeneutics and ethics; or, to put it another way: what role does understanding play in the good life? That it is important to be open-minded one would have to be mad to deny. It is necessary to recognise that I do not hold such convictions for *no reason*; the give-and-take of conversation can help to articulate these convictions and shed new light on them – and it can challenge and revise my unhelpful convictions. But the Gadamerian *phronimos* goes further than this; in becoming ‘radically undogmatic’ he seems to give up the idea of a conviction altogether, preferring open conversation. This is an image with appeal, and it has a definite place within our intellectual lives – but it would be a distortion to place it at the centre of our ethical lives.³⁰⁷ But this is what happens when, for instance, Gadamer writes: ‘Hermeneutic philosophy understands itself not as an absolute position but as a way of experience. It insists that there is no higher principle than holding oneself open in a conversation’ (PH 189). This is to raise the putting into question of one’s convictions to an absolute, when it is best grasped as a moment in a dialectic (if one is feeling Hegelian), or as one aim among others, which may be more or less prominent depending on what one is trying to do and the needs of the moment (if one is feeling Nietzschean).³⁰⁸

There is a striking contrast between the ‘radically undogmatic’ man one finds in *Truth and Method* and Gadamer’s discussion of ethics in his essay ‘On the possibility of a philosophical ethics’.³⁰⁹ The question Gadamer wants to work out the answer to is this: ‘The reflexive generality which is necessarily its philosophical metier entangles it [sc. philosophical ethics] in the

³⁰⁷ It is worthwhile to recall, in this connection, that Gadamer’s primary concern throughout *Truth and Method* is a very specific context: interpreting a text or work of art. The issue arises when he or his commentators generalise from here.

³⁰⁸ Raymond Geuss makes a related point: ‘In some contexts it is perfectly understandable that you might not be at all interested in the way the world looks to me – you may simply have perfectly legitimate, urgent concerns of your own that you think peremptorily require that one subordinate all else to their satisfaction. You have no interest in the shape, structure, and perspective of my own map of the surrounding landscape – if your needs are sufficiently pressing, you may wish to use whatever you can get in order to enable you to reach Oinville (like Roland and Corinne in Godard’s *Weekend*) as efficiently as possible. On the other hand, we do not generally think it represents a very high level of intellectual curiosity or human sensitivity to act in this way when not under the pressure of events.’ (‘Outside Ethics’, collected in Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, p. 62.)

³⁰⁹ Collected in HRE.

questionableness of law-based ethics. How can it do justice to the concreteness with which conscience, sensitivity to equity, and loving reconciliation are answerable to the situation?' (HRE 21) The claim he advances is that both Kant and Aristotle can contribute to resolving this dilemma. From Kant, Gadamer borrows the structure of the categorical imperative, which he thinks presents the unconditionality of the Ought in its purest form; what is significant is that, in this form, reason does not propound laws, but only tests them. From Aristotle, he borrows the sensitivity to the conditionedness of human life, that ethical life is dependent on the broader social and historical structures (i.e. objective spirit) in which it is bound up, and on the concrete system of valuations, ideals and goods that it lives by – Aristotle is concerned with 'concretising the universal'. He also suggests that, while they are historically determined, these valuations and forms of life are not infinitely plastic, bound up as they are with human nature and its material conditions (he does not use those terms), which provide resistance (HRE 35-6). A philosophical ethics, then, is a kind of refinement of moral consciousness: not 'a theory that must be made practically applicable' but rather a kind of reflection 'for those whose education in society and state has brought their own being to the point of such maturity that they are capable of recognising general rules of thumb in concrete perplexities and putting them into practice' (HRE 33). However, the essay is striking in what it lacks: there is no sense that these valuations and forms of life might be called into question – either from a radical perspective,³¹⁰ or even in the sense of *Truth and Method* where they are treated as prejudices to be put into question. Indeed, rather than open

³¹⁰ It is notable, in this connection, that Gadamer sets up a contrast at the beginning of the essay between philosophical ethics as an area of inquiry akin to that of the sciences, in which its aim is to discover new values, or as continuous with ordinary life, in which its aim is to explicate, lay bare and ground the claims of ordinary conscience (HRE 19). The former, he correctly observes, is bound up with an untenable conception of moral progress; but one wonders if we have been presented with a false dichotomy. If the claims of Nietzsche and his inheritors, on the one hand, or of Marx and his inheritors, on the other, are to be credited, then our forms of valuation and ways of life might be so fundamentally out of order that both the 'progressive' and 'explicative' approaches to moral philosophy are doomed to failure, since they are unwittingly caught in its orbit. As has long been noted, the content of Aristotle's moral philosophy serves to reinforce the prejudices of 4th century Athenian gentlemen (see Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* [Routledge, 1967], Ch. 7), and the content of Kant's moral philosophy is very much that of an 18th century Lutheran Prussian (see Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 1); and the 'moral progressive' viewpoint, such as that championed in the present day by Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, has likewise been criticised as an ideological defence of contemporary liberal democratic capitalism (see Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*).

conversation, Gadamer seems to endorse what he takes as the central moral question for Aristotle: 'What is to be done?' (HRE 30-1) There is a sense in this essay that the guiding question of ethics is not 'How do we understand (or reach understanding with) the other?' but rather 'How should be we live?'³¹¹

The tension between this vision of ethical life and the one we find in *Truth and Method* leads us back to the problem of why *understanding* is something important – which it surely is. But it is not an end in itself: frequently, the goal of understanding is something beyond it, as when I need to understand a situation because I am trying to work out what I need to do. Understanding thus finds its place within a broader structure of what the good life looks like. One needs a more fundamental account of ethics to provide that. In lieu of providing such an account (that would be a whole other project than the one I am engaged on), let us briefly consider a couple of recent examples from the literature in which this problem manifests itself.

The first is Monica Vilhauer's book *Gadamer and the Ethics of Play*. Vilhauer attempts to develop an ethics of play and dialogue out of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Genuine dialogue is 'open', rather than scientific or psychological; and 'openness' means allowing the other to address you 'like a Thou' (in Gadamer's phrase). In light of our present interests, what is most striking about Vilhauer's account is what it lacks. For a dialogue to count as genuine, not only must it be characterised by 'openness to the Other' but this openness must also be 'ethical': 'somehow directed toward "the good", or understood as something valuable for us, either in itself, or in the service of bringing about some ultimate "good"' (p. 111). In a note to this sentence, Vilhauer claims that this concept of "the good" need not be the Platonic form, since 'the good as that which corresponds to a flourishing life will do fine in this discussion' (p. 114). Earlier in the book, while setting out what the criteria are for a genuinely ethical I-Thou encounter, Vilhauer presents this as the fourth and final criterion: 'These I-Thou relations ultimately provide for a process in which mutual human growth can

³¹¹ I prefer this formulation of the question to 'What is to be done?' for reasons Bernard Williams sets out in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, chapter 1. In another essay, Gadamer says of practical philosophy that it 'expressly asks the question of the good [...] for example, about the best way of life' (RAS 93).

occur, making them I-Thou relations that are ultimately *directed toward our common human good*' (p. 76, italics in original).

These are the only discussions of "the good" to occur in the book. What is striking about them is two-fold: (1) the idea of the good plays a central role in the account Vilhauer is sketching; (2) the idea of the good is left as a *floating variable* – its content is left unspecified apart from a broad gesture in the direction of 'a flourishing life'. Thus Vilhauer presents an account of one aspect of ethical life, but not a fundamental account of what ethical life is; it is simply presupposed that the human good, into which ethical dialogues inquire, includes participation in ethical dialogues.

Our second example is a recent essay by Dennis Schmidt.³¹² For Schmidt, the essential thing about hermeneutics is that it is not primarily a theory but rather a way of orienting oneself in the world. Hermeneutics is the recognition that one is one's understanding, and one cannot help but orient oneself in accordance with this understanding. The goal of hermeneutics is thus 'first and foremost to gain an understanding, and this understanding is, in the end, what one becomes' (p. 46). A hermeneutical ethics, then, is one that prioritises *making sense* as its highest task: making sense of oneself, making sense of others, making sense of the tradition, and *making sense of humanity*;³¹³ and it also emphasises the always-incomplete nature of this understanding,³¹⁴ and the way articulating our understanding through dialogue with others can show up our own limitations and blind spots.³¹⁵ Such a way of thinking about a hermeneutical ethics reaches deeper than the dialogical model (such as Vilhauer's), since it situates the need for dialogue within a broader picture of the good, the more general goal of understanding as such.

It is not immune from its own perils, though. The primary one is manifest in Schmidt's obvious discomfort at the idea that such a conception of ethics risks raising the life of the (hermeneutical) professor, who (in principle) has the skills and resources to best make sense of himself, to the status of ethical paradigm (p.

³¹² Schmidt (2012), 'On the Sources of Ethical Life', *Research in Phenomenology*, 42, pp. 35-48.

³¹³ There is a potential convergence here with the later work of Bernard Williams.

³¹⁴ See also Long (2002), 'The Ontological Reappropriation of *Phronesis*', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 35, esp. p. 55.

³¹⁵ See Gadamer (2006), 'The Incapacity for Conversation [1972]', trans. D. Vessey and C. Blauwkamp, *Continental Philosophy Review*, 39, p. 354.

46).³¹⁶ This discomfort, it seems to me, points us towards what is lacking in this account: by immediately positing ‘making sense’ as its highest priority, it loses sight of the more fundamental motivation of ethical life: the desire for a good life, the right life, or a life that is oriented towards what matters. One can situate making sense of oneself (and of others and of one’s world) within this deeper orientation; and situating it in this way lets us see that the life of hermeneutical understanding is only one way of life among others (such as the theoretical or the political, to take but two other traditional candidates). Someone with substantial insight into themselves and into others may be admirable for this reason, but it is important not to lose sight of the fact that there are plenty of other admirable characteristics with no connection to the hermeneutic virtues.³¹⁷ Recall, for example, the remark of Nietzsche’s I quoted earlier:

Everyone has made at least this one simple observation: a human being’s historical knowledge and sensitivity can be very limited, his horizon as narrow as that of the inhabitant of an isolated alpine valley; each of his judgments may contain an injustice, each experience may be marked by a misconception that he is the first to experience it – yet in spite of all these injustices and all these misconceptions, he stands there, vigorously healthy and robust, a joy to look at.³¹⁸

Even where the hermeneutical is incorporated as a significant priority, it is worth noting that the Heidegger of *Being and Time* does not set up the hermeneutical life as the ideal life in the way Schmidt does; rather, he seems to think that an existential analysis of human life³¹⁹ frees one up from the (inauthentic) life of avoiding thinking about one’s death, lived according to

³¹⁶ Risser (in *The Life of Understanding*) takes a similar stance, but situates it within a more ambitious conception of the relation between self and history, and the need to ‘recover’ that history.

³¹⁷ For the concept of the admirable in ethics, see Raymond Geuss, ‘Virtue and the Good Life’, in his *Outside Ethics*, p. 95. See also his essay ‘Nietzsche and Morality’, collected in *Morality, Culture, History* (Cambridge, 1999). I note that in his ethics Hume also attempts to treat the concept of admiration as of central importance: see *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Sec. 1, ¶10.

³¹⁸ Nietzsche, ‘On the Utility and Liability of History for Life’, pp. 90-91.

³¹⁹ That ‘*Dasein*’ is not synonymous with ‘human life’ is not important for the present point.

priorities one has uncritically taken over from one's community, so that one can instead face up to death and set up one's own (authentic) priorities – these priorities need not be hermeneutical ones.³²⁰ In any case, being able to make sense of oneself is also not all that one needs: if I lack the habits of thought, feeling and action (i.e. the virtues) that enable me to live the kind of life that I could affirm, it will be of little benefit to me if I am able to make painfully clear sense of my own failures.³²¹ On the other hand, if all of my attempts to live the right life meet with frustration, this failing might not be entirely my own: a hermeneutical imagination might be able to show me the way my failure to find the right life is bound up with a fundamental disorder in the world in which I am trying to live it.³²²

We thus have another case of a hermeneutical ethics not reaching deep enough to ground itself. Part of the reason for this, I suspect, is that the hermeneutical ethos is very close to the outlook of a liberal society, which we take for granted. I suggested earlier that Gadamer's ideal of the *phronimos* is actually a kind of liberal character, so I would now like to unpack that a bit. My goal is to be suggestive rather than thorough. I am interested not so much in the political opinions held by Gadamer himself, as in the ways in which the direction of his philosophy aligns or does not align with certain aspects of a liberal political outlook.³²³

The first thing to be said about liberalism is that, as an historical formation, it consists of several elements that do not necessarily have any internal relation to each other, and that may or may not sit together entirely comfortably. Being historical, it does not have an essence: as Nietzsche says, only that which has no history can be defined. Rather, the best approach to liberalism *in general* (rather than to some specific philosophical formulation of liberalism, such as that of

³²⁰ Heidegger thinks, further, that an authentic orientation is also the only possible starting point for adequately asking the question of being, but that need not concern us for the present.

³²¹ Schmidt makes something like this point at the end of his essay, p. 48.

³²² Cf. Adorno's remark 'There is no right life in a false one' (*Minima Moralia*, §18); MacIntyre's characterization of contemporary moral life as consisting of disconnected and incompatible fragments, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 2007), Ch. 1; and Geuss's suggestion that any virtue ethics needs to be situated within the context of a critical theory of society, 'Virtue and the Good Life', pp. 94-96.

³²³ For my present purposes it is appropriate to treat 'liberalism', 'liberal political outlook', and various cognates, as synonyms.

Rawls) is to treat it as an ideal type, and then identify its various historical threads. (Needless to say, any particular formulation of liberalism will only partially correspond to this ideal type.) To put things in another way, I am not interested in how Gadamer's thought aligns with some particular formulation of liberal political philosophy, but rather with how it relates to liberalism as an ideological formation, which is to say as a basic political outlook (or family of outlooks) that is more or less widely shared and from which more sophisticated philosophical formulations proceed. Thus, I take it that there are five main strands to which liberalism is committed: (1) toleration, (2) freedom, (3) individualism, (4) limits to the extent of coercive power that can be exercised over the individual, and (5) consensus.³²⁴ It seems to me that Gadamer's thought does not interestingly relate to (2) or (4), so I will leave those to one side. The other three strands I will discuss one by one.

(1) Toleration. We can distinguish between three major political forms toleration can take. The first is its most minimal form: toleration is preferable in *these* circumstances to open hostility (even if only barely). For example, two groups might be deeply hostile to each other, but evenly enough matched in power to make any conflict potentially extremely damaging to both groups, so they might prefer a course of mutual toleration (until one of them becomes clearly more powerful, or until the hostility is just too great to be contained). This first kind of toleration falls short of being 'liberal' toleration. Second, it may come in a moderate form: hostility and conflict are politically very undesirable (even if your group would clearly be the winner), and a policy of toleration is the best way to avoid them. This is the most minimal form of 'liberal' toleration: difference might not be a good thing in itself, but conflict is definitely a bad thing. Finally, there is what we might call 'strong' toleration: difference is an

³²⁴ My account of liberalism more or less follows that of Raymond Geuss in his *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge, 2001). Weirdly, although Geuss discusses all five threads, he only explicitly identifies the first four as constitutive of liberalism; the fifth, consensus, is treated not in the chapter on liberalism, but in the introduction, pp. 4ff. I take it to be sufficiently central to the liberal project to be included on the cardinal list. As will become clear, this is particularly important for my present purposes, as Gadamer's proximity to the consensus aspect of liberalism is a significant one. An additional point: one might suppose that there should be a sixth item on the list, 'justice', since at least one dominant mode of liberal theorising since the 1970s has made justice a (or even the) central political virtue. Since I don't think Gadamer has much of interest to say on the topic, I will just leave it to one side.

opportunity for challenge and growth; a diverse society is better than a homogeneous one; and so we should not only tolerate difference but welcome it. This is the form of tolerance one finds, for example, in self-consciously 'multicultural' societies.

Gadamer has strong affinities with both the second and third forms of toleration. His affinity with the second strand comes from his emphasis on our finitude. To be finite is to be partially delusional and prone to error. Since that is our condition, Gadamer praises knowledge of one's own finitude as the highest form of knowledge. In the context of social life, finitude generates a whole host of potential issues. Gadamer emphasises the way the activity of others always has the potential to leave us puzzled: on his view, it is just not possible to understand each other, and the projects within which we operate, with sufficient clarity that we will always make immediate sense to each other. Disruption and disharmony is thus inevitable; and Gadamer's emphasis on the need to always work to make understand each other stems from this.³²⁵

On the one hand, stressing the inevitability of misunderstanding and conflict seems eminently sensible. It is this seeming inevitability that lends liberal political philosophy much of its appeal. But on the other hand, we should not lose sight of what is thus lost. The motivating idea behind a substantive social and political philosophy like Hegel's is that to live in a world that cannot be rendered transparently intelligible is to live in a world in which one cannot be entirely autonomous. If not all people's projects and practices make sense to everyone, then the institutions, rules and laws that spring up to facilitate those projects and practices will not make sense to everyone, either. One thus finds oneself bounded on all sides by rules, laws, and institutions to which one cannot reconcile oneself, since one cannot make sense of them; and in order to get by, one must conform oneself to these things simply because they exist. This is to live under what Kant would call heteronomy, since one must act in accordance with reasons that are not one's own.

The radical implications of Hegel's social philosophy are therefore lost. For even if social life is not now rationally intelligible, perhaps it could be made so.

³²⁵ This comes through in his essay 'Notes on Planning for the Future', which was discussed at the end of Ch. 1.

But this would require a robust account of reason, one with sufficient self-confidence to reject as irrational all that does not conform to itself; and it is precisely this kind of self-confident rationality that is denied by Gadamer's insistence on attending and listening to the other as the highest priority. Such self-confident rationality could only be, from Gadamer's perspective, arrogant or even hubristic: its dismissal of the other as irrational could only be an attempt to shield its basic presuppositions from criticism. If Gadamer is right, then conflict arising from mutual lack of understanding may be a permanent feature of political life; we should, then, be suspicious of utopian political projects;³²⁶ and, so long as we are averse to conflict, toleration in this moderate sense will remain a central political virtue.

So much, then, for moderate toleration; but Gadamer is also committed to toleration in its stronger sense. He is placed in this camp by his strongly positive valuation of genuine experience: the encounter with the other is an opportunity to have my prejudices subjected to challenge. (This affirmation of challenge is primarily what I had in mind in Ch. V when I claimed that the kind of character Gadamer values is a kind of liberal character.) In a conversation with Riccardo Dottori, he claims that there is a need for a 'global conversation', 'or we will be lost'.³²⁷ One can read this claim as ambivalent between the moderate and strong senses of toleration: global conflict is to be avoided, and a global conversation will assist with its avoidance; but a global conversation (on Gadamer's model of dialogue) would further develop the outlook of all participants.

Gadamer's positive valuation of having one's prejudices called into question further aligns him with another liberal preoccupation, that of anti-paternalism – in certain strands of left-liberal thought, this means not imposing my own conception of the good on others, but of being open to theirs. One might find it surprising that there is a parallel between Gadamer's thought, with its reactionary-sounding 'rehabilitation of authority and prejudice', and anti-paternalistic strands in liberal political thought. However, it is not so surprising when one bears in mind that the whole point of Gadamer's "rehabilitation" is

³²⁶ Cf. Dieter Misgeld, 'Poetry, Dialogue and Negotiation: Liberal Culture and Conservative Politics in Hans-Georg Gadamer's Thought', in Wright (ed.), *Festivals of Interpretation* (SUNY, 1990), p. 170.

³²⁷ Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy* (Continuum, 2004), p. 73.

precisely *not* the authoritarian one of setting up an authority one must obey (whether this authority is a person or the tradition), but rather to break us of the idea that we (each individually) are the authority to whose judgement others must submit: we must, rather, submit our judgement to the scrutiny and challenge of others.

(3) Individualism. This is the issue on which Gadamer is least liberal, although this claim needs qualifying. If individualism means that the individual is ontologically fundamental, then Gadamer is quite clearly opposed to it – he takes it that we are creatures of our tradition first, and individuals second.³²⁸ His concept of authority and genuine experience would also lead to suspicion of the goals of individualism as a political concept:³²⁹ one of the basic claims of individualism is that the individual is the highest authority concerning his or her own good. (This is connected with anti-paternalism, albeit in a way Gadamer would reject.) But this could only lead individuals into the temptation to treat themselves as authorities, giving them an excuse to shield their own priorities from the challenge of others.

In a related way, Gadamer would also have to be suspicious of any doctrine of rights. Any ontological conception of rights – the claim that individuals simply *have* rights – would be excluded, since Gadamer doesn't think about the individual in that way. A socially constructive conception of rights is still a possibility; however, anyone who takes his analysis of experience seriously has strong reason to be suspicious of any doctrine of rights, since a right is a defence that enables one to simply reject a claim made on one by someone else, and Gadamer's whole analysis (and praise) of genuine experience runs counter to that. From this perspective, a right is just an excuse not to take another's claim seriously. However, this doesn't mean that, because of other considerations, one might not think a doctrine of rights is a good idea *even though* it has this

³²⁸ PH 7.

³²⁹ When I say 'political concept', I take it that part of the point of a concept of political philosophy is to make a kind of intervention; thus one can use 'individualism' not only to describe a political society, but also to justify or criticise that society. So when Thatcher famously claimed that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and families, she is simultaneously describing what she takes to be a basic feature of reality, criticising those aspects of her political community that are not in alignment with this reality, and justifying a project of their dismantling. (She also leaves one wondering what the ontological reality of the family is.)

deficiency. One might think that, even if a doctrine of rights is not ideal, if the alternative is arbitrary interference by other individuals and/or the state, one might prefer to have rights.

Now, it should also be observed that insofar as individualism means the *autonomy* of the individual, a slight rapprochement with Gadamer is possible. This is because Gadamer is committed to some form of the Enlightenment concept of autonomy: the individual must think for him- or herself (TM 280). It is just that his conception of autonomy is the result of an internal critique of the ideal of autonomy (and it is to this critique that his “rehabilitation” belongs): we might say that his conception of autonomy is ‘post-individualist’.

(5) Consensus. Gadamer’s closest proximity to liberalism is in his conception of the role of consensus. In liberal political thought, consensus operates in a few different ways. First of all, in the social contract tradition (which is obviously larger than just the liberal tradition, nor does all of the liberal tradition involve a social contract), a political community is conceived of as existing on the basis of some kind of actual past or hypothetical present consensus: all (or most) of the members of that community agree(d) to participate in it. Second, disagreement is taken to be relative to some shared agreement. We might disagree on what the best course of action is, but we agree that the best way of proceeding involves mutual tolerance – there is, in other words, a more fundamental shared agreement that governs the disagreement. Third, no disagreement is intractable: consensus can always be reached, or – at a minimum – disagreement can be mediated away.³³⁰

Gadamer’s hermeneutics presupposes equivalents of the second and third commitments to consensus. All disagreement between ‘I’ and ‘Thou’, he says, presupposes a ‘deep common accord’.³³¹ His conception of dialogue, too, takes

³³⁰ None of these three views concerning consensus need be taken as being exclusively liberal. Any political society must have ‘consensus’ in some minimal sense, otherwise it would not be a single political society. However, this consensus need not consist of very much: it may simply be the tacit consensus involved in not actively rebelling. In the case of liberalism, however, the more one insists on the freedom of each individual the more robust a form of consensus one needs – both to explain how the society holds together, but also in order to justify that society. One wants to be able to say not just that this society happens to hold together (perhaps through inertia), but that it holds together because of the free consent of its constituents.

³³¹ PH 7

for granted that agreement is always a possible, if not actual, outcome. Let us consider these two assumptions in turn, with an eye to problematising them.

The idea that all disagreement occurs against the background of some agreement is often justified by pointing out that disagreement is only genuine disagreement if there is some agreement on what the disagreement is *about*. Otherwise, the two parties would not be disagreeing, but merely talking past each other. This is true of intellectual disagreements, but one wonders whether political disagreement might be of a different variety. Disagreement about what issues are actually at stake may well be the paradigm of genuinely political disagreement (as opposed to administrative disagreement, in which we disagree how the issues are to be dealt with). To take Marx's example, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat have such divergent concerns that they will not be able to agree on a conceptual vocabulary in which to disagree: what for one is a contract freely entered into between two parties is for the other a coerced extraction of labour power.³³² Each is correct from their own perspective, so mediation seeking a shared agreement can only succeed if one side abandons their right.³³³ Thus parties to a disagreement need not be oriented towards reaching consensus.

It might be objected that if one looks further back one can always find a deeper consensus – even if this consensus is, finally, a common language. In a trivial sense this is true, in that one can always find a 'fundamental' agreement if one looks hard enough. But what is striking is the slipperiness of this fundamental agreement – it need not always be the same. Perhaps both parties accept the reality of the world, though perhaps not (if the disagreement is over idealism); perhaps both parties to a land dispute (one may take 'land dispute' as a euphemism for colonisation or invasion if one likes) agree that the land is desirable, though perhaps not (I may just prefer you did not possess the land, even if it has no appeal to me). Even the language we speak is not a neutral territory of agreement, since the disagreement may even be over what the correct conceptual vocabulary is.

³³² For the inability to agree on a shared vocabulary, see also MacIntyre's work on rival traditions: *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, 1991). In the latter work, MacIntyre does attempt to work out an account of toleration and consensus on the basis of a shared concern for the good.

³³³ See Karl Marx, *Capital* (Progress Publishers, 1986), Vol. 1, Ch.10, Sec. 1: 'Between equal rights force decides.'

We will probably have more luck if we see agreement/disagreement as a relative and shifting distinction, since whether we can be said to be in agreement or disagreement about something will often require some assumption about relative to *what* we are agreeing or disagreeing. Two parties engaged in a dispute over conceptual vocabulary can be said to be in agreement about the language to be used *relative to* some other possibilities (perhaps both speak English, not French), but in disagreement *in relation to* the meaning and relevance of 'exploitation'. Which is the more fundamental point will depend on the stance one takes: if one is inclined to see society *sub specie consensus*, then one will be inclined to insist that the agreement one can find is the fundamental thing, but I can see no reason why we should make that assumption. Disagreements may sometimes be mere surface phenomena, but at other times they may run deep; there is no reason to exclude deep disagreements in advance.

The hermeneutical ethos, then, appeals to us in part because it resonates with certain dominant assumptions about how to live together; and these assumptions are frequently taken for granted when assessing the place of understanding in the good life. But this does not mean that the hermeneutical virtues are not admirable; it means only that they are in competition with other visions of the good life (such as Nietzsche's vision of the vigorous, spontaneous, *unreflective* person). Hermeneutical clear-sightedness demands that we recognise this, and seek to work through an account of the good life that is not so cavalier about the absolute value of dialogical openness. This means, in part, recognising the role of the failure of genuine experience in the narrative of our lives.

3. Genuine Experience, Narrative and Failure

The concept of genuine experience has had implicit narrative dimensions all along. A genuine experience occurs when I have a set of (more or less conscious) anticipations that are defied by some event, and this leads me to call into question the ground of these anticipations, and thus to come to understand

myself and the world around me anew – this is both the movement of spirit Hegel traces ('at home', alienated, reconciled) *and* the basic structure of a narrative (set-up, crisis, resolution). Narratives have a well-established hermeneutical significance,³³⁴ not least because they are vital sense-making practices; Heidegger noted that our everyday experience is shaped by the way we project ourselves into the future, and such projections have an implicit narrative structure (since any given moment is in the middle of some narrative); and Ricoeur notes that experiences have a structure that makes them (potentially) the basic stuff of as-yet-untold narratives.³³⁵ Charles Taylor has recently made the argument that many of the insights we learn through our lives are not fully detachable from the narrative of which they are a part, echoing Gadamer's insistence that a genuine experience deepens one's already-existing understanding of something.³³⁶ Since the *locus classicus* for narrative self-understanding is MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, I will begin by showing the parallels between MacIntyre's discussion of narrative events and Gadamer's concept of genuine experience, and then proceed to critical analysis.

In a paper on epistemological crises, MacIntyre opens with a discussion of what must count as 'genuine experiences' for the people involved: break-ups of relationships that lead one to question one's whole reading of a person, thinking that one is a valued employee and then being fired, etc.³³⁷ Our understanding of others, he notes, is grounded in the schemata of a shared culture, which underlie both my ability to act intelligibly and my ability to make sense of the actions of others. When something fails to go according to plan (what I took to be a steady relationship breaks down, I am fired from the job I thought I was doing well in) then these schemata suddenly become problematic for us – we consciously reflect on them, perhaps for the first time (p. 4). The task becomes that of re-writing the narrative in light of which we understand our situation; until we can do this, we remain in crisis (p. 5). When this crisis is resolved, two results are

³³⁴ See Gallagher, 'Self and Narrative', in Malpas & Gander (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*.

³³⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1., Ch. 3.

³³⁶ Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 291, and the rest of Ch. 8.

³³⁷ 'Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science', first published in 1977, now collected in *The Tasks of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2006).

achieved: the new narrative allows us both to understand our situation and to understand how we could have gone wrong. The result is a deeper understanding – although not a final understanding, since ‘our beliefs about what the marks of “a best account so far” are will themselves change in what are at present unpredictable ways’ (p. 6). This closely parallels Gadamer’s account of genuine experience: crisis is reconciled through a deeper understanding, but a deeper understanding that does not exclude the possibility of further experience.

Then, in *After Virtue*,³³⁸ MacIntyre elaborates this insight, concluding that the basic structure of a good life is a life spent in pursuit of the good life – its narrative structure is that of the quest, in which the protagonist sets out in pursuit of one thing and then, in the course of events, comes to understand both himself and the thing he is pursuing better (and thus differently) than he did initially.³³⁹ The important point is that the central feature of a quest is that the protagonist sets out to acquire something of great importance but which is not entirely defined, and along the way overcomes a variety of challenges that lead to a deepening of their understanding of themselves and of the value of the thing pursued. The essential idea is that a human life is best characterised as a quest to realise a good human life. This too can be read nicely in terms of genuine experience. At any given time, someone has more or less determinate ideas about how their life is going and where it is going, but in the course of living it various disruptions happen – a promising project is foiled, a loved one dies, something one thought would make one happy turns out not to. These disruptions call into question what one had taken for granted – when a project fails, I am forced to rethink what it is I am working towards; when a loved one dies, I need to restructure my life around the gap they have left if I am to cope; and when something I had been striving for fails to make me happy, I find myself either looking for something else or forced to re-evaluate what I had taken happiness to be.³⁴⁰ Understanding life as fitting to the narrative of a quest is a way of domesticating the disruptions that happen along the way as moments in a broader narrative that itself has a coherent and broadly affirmative structure.

³³⁸ First published 1981.

³³⁹ *After Virtue*, Ch. 15, esp. pp. 219-20.

³⁴⁰ A deep study of this latter phenomenon, what Hegel would call the bad infinity of desire, is David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest* (Little, Brown, 1996).

But genuine experiences are even more disruptive than this, since it seems entirely possible that what one comes to realise is that the narrative of one's life has changed: perhaps one realises, too late, that one was deluded about one's real priorities, concealing a lie one comes to see as reprehensible behind a veneer of good intentions that fools even oneself; or, less pessimistically, that one's priorities were all wrong. Raymond Geuss has noted that understanding one's life in terms of a single narrative may just be too restrictive: 'A human life "as a whole" does not seem to me at all like a single huge race or the deployment of a craft. It seems to me highly questionable whether my whole life admits of treatment as a single narrative in any interesting sense, but even if I were to grant that it is or could be such a narrative, the kind of narrative in question would have to be the one that would be only contingently related to the "story" of a single agon, competition, or race. [...] If we at any *particular* time give our desires some minimal order by reference to some conception of a single overarching good, we also know that those conceptions of a unitary good *change* during our lives. Any unity of desire is "necessarily" and unavoidably fleeting, transitory, fragile, and imposed on much more chaotic structures that are, however, not just nothing or "empty".'³⁴¹ The idea here is that grasping human life as a *single* narrative, a single quest, totally passes over the way our projects and priorities can change so much that it becomes extremely difficult to see myself as having, in the past, been working towards anything that is of real importance to me now; and I can recognise now that this contingency means that I may in the future come to repudiate everything I am working towards now.³⁴² However, it is not at all clear that this means I cannot, from the perspective of the present, always construe my life in terms of a narrative that makes sense of where I am now; past episodes in which I pursued things that appear to me now as totally idiotic, misguided, confused, etc., could be construed as side episodes and distractions, or as the history of blunders that brought me to where I am. A narrative does not necessarily have to form a coherent whole, anyway; as Eagleton has noted, understanding your life as a narrative 'does not mean that

³⁴¹ Geuss, *A World Without Why*, p. 64.

³⁴² This is in opposition to the Stoic ideal of 'constancy', of remaining true to the same set of priorities in all circumstances. For a recent biography of Seneca that reads his life in terms of his success or failure to live up to this ideal, see Emily Wilson, *Seneca: A Life* (Penguin, 2016).

everything from cutting your first teeth to losing the lot of them has to form a logically coherent whole. Not many narratives of any degree of subtlety have that kind of unity. Narratives can be multiplied, ruptured, recursive and diffuse and still be narratives.’³⁴³

Nonetheless, there is something hermeneutically very significant in Geuss’s rejection of the idea that one can sum up a life in a single narrative ‘in any interesting sense’. This can be brought out by considering the view of life that finds its expression in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: that any and every life can be summed up in a single image. As Geuss puts it: ‘The lives of those whom Dante encounters are seen as in some way summed up in a single image: Paolo and Francesca buffeted by the unending wind of desire, the sodomites running an eternal race over a desert, Ulysses in his flame.’³⁴⁴ Dante’s view, it seems to me, only makes sense if there is some kind of final perspective on what is significant in human life: what matters in the end is how well one avoided sin and practiced (Christian) virtue; everything else is so much worldly stuff, of no final importance. But if there is no final perspective, but rather only an endless array of shifting perspectives that reflect one’s present priorities, then no life can be thus summed up without remainder – whatever is sidelined or left out in *this* image or *this* narrative may well be of fundamental importance for another narrative. Hermeneutically, it makes all the difference in the world whether one can establish a final viewpoint or not. My contention is that we cannot establish a final viewpoint, and that Gadamer’s attempt to smuggle one in ends in failure.

The trouble with Gadamer’s concept of genuine experience, and with MacIntyre’s notion of life as a quest, is that they are both implicitly affirmative: genuine experience leads to reconciliation and deeper understanding, and the quest transmutes today’s suffering into tomorrow’s insight into the good life for man.³⁴⁵ Implicit in Gadamer’s concept of the ‘experienced man’ is that his life

³⁴³ Eagleton, *After Theory* (Allen Lane, 2003), p. 127.

³⁴⁴ *A World Without Why*, p. 244n26.

³⁴⁵ This is connected with what Grondin calls ‘the truth of hope’ in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. I am claiming that Gadamer passes beyond hope (I can hope that today’s suffering will be tomorrow’s insight) into optimism (Gadamer does not really consider the possibility that this process won’t be fulfilled). See Grondin (2004), ‘Gadamer’s Hope’, *Renascence*, 56, 4, pp. 287-292. Weinsheimer claims that, for Gadamer, experience is the disappointment of hope, but this hope is the hope that my current understanding will be borne out (*Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, p. 201); he then modifies this a few pages later into the form I am offering a critique of: ‘If experience does not reach

narrative will ultimately be affirmative: even though one wished one did not have to suffer one's way into truth, it is better to be what one is now. My objection is not that this is wrong, but that it is incomplete. Gadamer would seem to be unduly optimistic in his confidence that a genuine experience is ultimately a good thing. As his reference to Aeschylus makes clear – *pathei mathos*, 'by suffering learned' – genuine experience is to be understood on the model of tragedy; but the model of tragedy he has in mind seems to be broadly Hegelian: the human spirit only progresses through its encounter with negativity, but progress through negativity it does.³⁴⁶ He opposes one kind of teleology of experience (its completion in the concept), but replaces it with another (the growth of openness). However, genuine experiences do not necessarily end well, nor are lives necessarily characterised by increasing insight or openness to the future. The upshot of a genuine experience might be that one comes to see one's life not as a quest but as a failure,³⁴⁷ or that one comes to a reconciliation that others will struggle to affirm, or one might fail to learn anything at all.

We might oppose to Aeschylus's *pathei mathos*³⁴⁸ Euripides's much bleaker picture of reality. In the *Hekabe*, for example, nobody seems to learn anything through their suffering. Hekabe has just witnessed the destruction of her city, she has fallen from queen to slave, her husband is dead, almost all of her children are dead – and it breaks her. One thing piles on another: Polyxena, her daughter, is torn away from her so that the Greeks can sacrifice her to appease Achilles's ghost; and then she discovers that her son Polydorus, whom she had thought was her sole surviving son, is dead – murdered by Polymestor, the man to whom

closure in knowledge, that is because being experienced consists not only in preserving hope to the end but extending it beyond every end and, in an openness to new experience, to the unexpected, to possibility, and to the future' (*ibid.*, p. 204). Risser, too, moves immediately from the pain of new experience (when the self is forced to accommodate itself to something other) to recovery (*The Life of Understanding*, Chs. 2 & 3).

³⁴⁶ On the tragic element in Hegel's thought, and for further references, see Eagleton, *Sweet Violence* (Blackwell, 2003), Ch. 3.

³⁴⁷ Schmidt makes a similar point when he suggests that 'ethical understanding needs to be able to account for, and come to terms with, [the] inherent errancy of life', which Gadamer does not adequately account for. See Schmidt, 'The Sources of Ethical Life', pp. 47-48.

³⁴⁸ Had it been written by Euripides, I would suspect parody in 'Seven Against Thebes' when Antigone comments of her two brothers that only *now* (that they are dead) do they understand the folly of trying to shed each others' blood: 'You have learned the lesson by experience,' she says (l. 989; trans. David Grene in Grene & Lattimore (ed.) *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, 4 volumes [Chicago, 1959], 1:298). The Greek does not contain either *pathein* (to suffer, experience) or *mathein* (to learn), however; the operative verbs are *oida* (to know) and *diaperaw* (to pass through). My thanks to James Horan for discussion of this passage.

she had entrusted him. All of this sends her mad with grief, and she takes her revenge by blinding Polymestor and murdering his sons in turn. Hekabe's experiences have driven her beyond anything a human can bear, and so in the end she is turned into a dog.³⁴⁹

Alice Munro's story 'Gravel' also presents us with a genuine experience that has destructive force, a genuine experience rooted (unlike Hekabe's) in the experiences of daily life.³⁵⁰ The story is told in retrospect by a young woman who was, at the time of the events narrated, only a small child. Her mother has just left her father (an insurance salesman) for Neal, who is something of a hippie, and represents to her (the mother) some kind of liberation. She takes her two small children to live in a caravan with Neal, on the edge of the town they lived in. Near their caravan is a gravel pit, perhaps 10 or 20 feet deep, which in winter is filled with water. Caro, the narrator's older sister, for obscure reasons (in protest against her mother? for the fun of it? simply to cause a fuss?) jumps into the water after throwing their dog in, and the narrator has to run back to the caravan to get the adults. Her memory is confused, but, whatever happened, help didn't arrive in time, and Caro drowned. Neal leaves, and her mother and father now avoid talking about it, but when – years later – she visits Neal, he gives her this advice: 'The thing is to be happy. No matter what. Just try that. You can. It gets easier and easier. It's nothing to do with circumstances. You wouldn't believe how good it is. Accept everything and then tragedy disappears. Or tragedy lightens, anyway, and you're just there, going along easy in the world.' The story then ends with this reflection on the part of the narrator: 'I see what he meant. It really is the right thing to do. But, in my mind, Caro keeps running at the water and throwing herself in, as if in triumph, and I'm still caught, waiting for her to explain to me, waiting for the splash.'³⁵¹

This narrative exhibits all of the hallmarks of a genuine experience. Something interrupts the normal flow of life, and calls a whole lot of things into question (to name but one, not indicated in the plot summary above: Caro's swimming lessons had been interrupted by her moving to the caravan with her mother); it

³⁴⁹ For this reading, see Anne Carson's preface to her translation of 'Hekabe', *Grief Lessons* (NYRB Classics, 2006), p. 93; cf. also Dante's *Inferno*, Bk. XXX.

³⁵⁰ Collected in her *Dear Life* (Chatto & Windus, 2012).

³⁵¹ *Dear Life*, pp. 108-9.

changes the lives of the whole family. And it remains standing out: the narrator, years later, is still unable to make sense of the event. The experience will not let her go.

Next, let us consider the plight of Winston in Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – in particular, his ultimate fate. While Winston spends much of the novel increasingly gripped by the conviction that the true history of the world matters, he is broken at the end. The final paragraph of the novel runs:

He gazed up at the enormous face [of Big Brother]. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.

Winston's understanding of the world has been totally transformed. While he spends most of the novel in the grip of rebellion against the powers of the world, against Big Brother and the Party, running from them and thinking himself one step ahead, it all comes to a terrible end for him. The transformation is brought about by O'Brien, the Party member whom Winston mistakenly thought was also in rebellion against the Party, who breaks him, torturing Winston until he will accept that $2 + 2 = 5$, or $2 + 2 =$ whatever it is the Party wants it to be. Until this point, Winston had insistently claimed that freedom was the freedom to say that $2 + 2 = 4$, and that every other freedom follows from that; O'Brien changes his mind about this, quite violently. Winston now sees the world quite differently – he even sees Big Brother's moustache in a different light.

In Gadamer's terms, O'Brien has succeeded in affecting a change in Winston's prejudices: the prejudice that $2 + 2 = 4$ is the basis of all freedom is changed to the prejudice that $2 + 2 =$ whatever the Party says. Prejudices, recall, are not in the first place propositional beliefs, but that which structures one's experience of the world. A transformation of a prejudice on the hermeneutical level (recall our

distinction between the phenomenological and the hermeneutical above) changes the way the world presents itself. And for Winston, this change is grasped as liberation from error and a reconciliation of the world: he had returned from his 'self-willed exile from the loving breast' and 'won the victory over himself'. In a grotesque parody of the traditional narrative form, the crisis has been resolved in a manner that seems to the protagonist a reconciliation and to the reader an awful failure.

But despite this failure, we have a candidate for genuine experience. Winston starts out understanding the world in light of certain prejudices, and through the course of his experience winds up seeing the world in quite a different light. The one sticking point is that, as I have tried to show, Gadamer connects the concept of genuine experience with the concept of truth. However, it is not at all clear that this disqualifies Winston's transformation from being a genuine experience. There are two crucial elements of Gadamer's concept of truth that make it unhelpful in resisting cases like this. (1) Truth for Gadamer is first-personal, and it is criterion-less. It is a matter of the sudden insight that leads me to see something in a different light to how I saw it before. In other words, there is no way of telling, at the time, whether I have had a real insight or have just been lead astray somehow. I have to hope the truth will out.³⁵² (2) As we have seen, truth for Gadamer has a few levels to it. At a basic level his account functions like truth-as-adequatio, where a genuine experience involves discarding false and misleading prejudices and replacing them with prejudices that are more adequate. But at a deeper level, there is no correspondence – language, tradition and prejudice serve to make the world what it is – they do not correspond to something beyond it. There is nothing that the concept of democracy corresponds to (although we might like to follow Hegel in suggesting that it can better or worse correspond to itself); rather, a particular polity can more or less correspond to the concept.

What these two elements amount to is that, for Winston, his transformation can only seem *to him* as though it is a genuine experience, although he might always later come to repudiate it (but the novel does not exactly give us hope for

³⁵² I take it that this is why Grondin is so insistent on what he calls 'the hermeneutics of vigilance' in *The Philosophy of Gadamer*.

this). That it does not seem so to us relates importantly to the second point. We do not live in a world in which $2 + 2 = 5$ (if the Party wants it to), but – and this is crucial – Winston *does*. If we are serious in supposing that the world is brought into being through language and tradition – that is to say, through human activities – then we have to suppose that a human world that was brutally out of shape would indeed still be the real world. Now, one might like to object that even in Winston’s world one can give a mathematical proof that $2 + 2 = 4$, but there is an important sense in which, in Winston’s world, this *does not matter*. What is *important* is that the Party says that $2 + 2 = 5$; that some mathematician somewhere could show otherwise is, in this world, irrelevant – so when he learns this, he learns something *true*. When Winston says that all freedom comes from the freedom to say that $2 + 2 = 4$, he is saying something false (as he learns to his cost); but if he could affect the change required to make it true, he would have transformed his world.³⁵³ The novel is so affecting for us because we live in a world in which what he says is (more or less) true³⁵⁴ – but we can also see how it could very easily become false. It shows up the contingency of an important feature of our world.³⁵⁵

We thus have strong reasons to suppose that Winston’s transformation is indeed a genuine experience; and if this is correct, then it should give us pause about universally affirming genuine experience as a good thing. After all, in Winston’s case, genuine experience is the destruction of revolutionary potential,

³⁵³ To put this point in other words, the belief that the mathematician’s proof of $2 + 2 = 4$ is *more important* than the Party’s assertion that $2 + 2 = 5$ is, in this world, idiosyncratic to Winston; its wider acceptance would be a revolution. In imagining that it is the basis of all freedom (which is clearly false, since his freedom to say $2 + 2 = 4$ lands him in a torture chamber), Winston is seeing the world from the standpoint of redemption (see Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §153).

³⁵⁴ ‘More or less’, but not entirely true: no doubt the Edward Snowdens of the world will be very relieved to hear that we are free to say what is true despite the wishes of the powerful. Perhaps they only want to lock him up to ensure that he is as free as possible. But nonetheless the hotly contested situation of whistle-blowers tells us that freedom of this kind is in dispute – we are somewhere between the world in which Winston finds himself and the world he would like to live in.

³⁵⁵ The reader will recall that I made a point of resisting what I called the ‘idealist’ reading of Gadamer, which gives us an ontology of language all the way down, in favour of a reading that sees language as *elaborating* the world. Why this was important should now be clear – I cannot see any way for an idealist reading of the ontology of language to resist the conclusion that what the Party says goes. On the other hand, if we understand language to be making things more than they otherwise are, this opens up the possibility that, since things are not infinitely plastic, what language makes of things may be gross distortions of what they could be. The unfree people of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are gross distortions of human beings – just as, so the Marxists claim, human beings under capitalism are gross distortions of genuinely free human beings, as they would be under socialism.

and the bringing of a potential rebel back into the fold. If the world is fundamentally out of order, then the result of experience may well be to give up hope for changing it.

Consider, finally, another novel: Samuel Beckett's *Mercier and Camier*.³⁵⁶ This novel presents us with a portrayal of the narrative structure of human life that I take to be at least as realistic as any affirmative one. Mercier and Camier meet at the beginning of the novel to set out on a task that is never actually specified. It has, then, something like the set-up of a quest. However, the rest of the novel proceeds to make a mockery of the very idea of a quest. M and C are slow to get going and suffer delays; they suffer setbacks, have to backtrack and make side-tracks; when they finally get to where they are going, they fail to achieve whatever it was that sent them there in the first place. Their quest ends in mutual recriminations, and they do not see each other again for some time. When they do next meet, it is in the company of Watt. They have lunch, during which Watt suffers a meltdown: "Fuck life!" he bellows, striking the table and causing a great fuss. M and C, unperturbed, leave him, happily reminiscing about the failed adventure narrated earlier in the novel.

There are a few important features to this narrative. The first is that, like a genuine experience, it fails to go to plan; the second is that, despite this, it is not clear that they learn anything. For this reason, the failed adventure cannot be construed as a quest, on MacIntyre's terms, since it failed to deepen the characters' appreciation for and understanding of the good life; but it does nevertheless fit with the later narrative – as fodder for fond reminiscence, as Mercier and Camier enjoy being reunited. MacIntyre, however, does not claim that all lives do fit the model of a quest, but rather that a good life does have that structure. To fit the model of a quest, one has to be reflective about one's life and make some kind of effort to work out what the good life is and to relate that to one's own life; Beckett's characters do not raise to this level of reflexive awareness.

However, Gadamer's account of genuine experience does not seem to claim to this normative status. What is normative in Gadamer is that one should be open to allow genuine experience to happen; but when it does happen, it is assumed

³⁵⁶ In *The Works of Samuel Beckett*, Volume 1.

that the transition from the second to the third stages (alienation to reconciliation) will necessarily follow. But for Mercier and Camier, the failure of their adventure (alienation) is not resolved; it merely fades into memory until it can be fondly recalled. The alienation is resolved by being forgotten.

There are, then, several ways that genuine experience can go awry. We can summarise the central trouble with Gadamer's concept of experience thus: *it lacks an adequate account of unproductive failure*. It succumbs to the wishful thinking that all failure is a kind of delayed success: 'If at first you don't succeed, try and try again.' There is certainly *something* to be said for treating failure as delayed success; the person who fails once and then gives up strikes us as either insufficiently committed or as a petulant child. But this does not exhaust the range of possible kinds of failure: some kinds of failure cannot be bounced back from; and some kinds of failure are not the failure to succeed in some task I had undertaken but rather the effect of destructive forces beyond my control. We have lost the capacity to make sense of a central range of human experience if we cannot see the destructive capacity of failure.

We have all become, this is to say, Euripides's Theseus from 'Suppliant Women'. Replying to a pessimistic speech by Adrastus, he says:

I have heard such arguments before, from others,
And fought them hard. Somebody said that life
Holds more of worse conditions than of better;
But I oppose that school, for I believe
That there are more good things than bad for mortals;
If there were not, the light would not be ours.
I praise the god who set our life in order,
Lifting it out of savagery and confusion.

(*Suppliant Women*, 195-202)³⁵⁷

³⁵⁷ Trans. F. W. Jones, in David Grene and Richard Lattimore (eds.), *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, 4:146.

Theseus goes on to say that it is only by overreach, when ‘we think we are wiser than the gods’ (l. 218), that we bring misery upon ourselves. This attitude, that life holds more good than bad, that misery is our own fault, is fundamental to the reason he gives for initially refusing to come to the aid of Adrastus and the suppliant women, who want him to recover their dead so they may bury them: You brought this on yourselves, he says, so why should I help? Theseus’s attitude also cannot make much sense of the plight of Iphis at the end of the play (and I suspect this is why Euripides included Iphis).³⁵⁸ Iphis comes on stage very briefly, just in time to see his daughter kill herself by jumping onto her husband’s funeral pyre – with her husband dead, she cannot see the point of going on. He says:

In grief I ask: Why cannot mortals be
twice young, then reach old age a second time?
If anything goes wrong at home, we right it
by aforethoughts; but not so with a life.
If youth and age came twice, a double life
would be our lot, and we could set things right
no matter what mistakes were made.

(*Suppliant Maidens*, 1080-1087)³⁵⁹

Iphis’s projects have come to ruin. There is no recovery from this kind of failure; it remains a wound, unresolved – the only solution would be to live life through again and ‘set things right’. Theseus’s comment that there is more good than bad in life could only sound callow to Iphis at this point: even if he were to say that *overall, for most people* the good outweighs the bad, this is of no help to Iphis. One wonders whether Theseus was tempted to tell him that if only he had raised his daughter better, to be more obedient, she would have stepped away from the funeral pyre when so instructed by her father. Similarly, on Gadamer’s account

³⁵⁸ Theseus’s attitude cannot be Euripides’s own; if Euripides thought that there is more good than bad in life, he chose a funny way to express it. Lattimore sums it up with laconic economy when he says of Euripides: ‘He believed in a world he disliked.’ (*The Complete Greek Tragedies*, 3:vii.)

³⁵⁹ *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, 4:178.

all we can offer him is the assurance that, while he is hurting now, we learn through suffering, and he will be more open to experience in future.

Detlev Claussen, in his biography of Adorno, speaks of Adorno's 'lifelong efforts to glue together in his own life the things that the history of society [...] had torn apart.'³⁶⁰ Adorno speaks of 'emigration, the damaged life',³⁶¹ and it is evident that Adorno would not have wished the experience on anyone. When one's experiences keep violently interrupting one's hopes and plans and projects, it calls into question the very possibility of finding some kind of stable meaning and identity through time; or, as Claussen again puts it, for Adorno 'the identity principle is questioned not just philosophically but by the experience of "a damaged life".'³⁶² Gadamer's concept of experience brings certain central aspects of experience into view, but while it appears to give a central place to failure, it can only make sense of character-forming failure. 'Genuine experience' may be character forming, but it may also be character destroying. If we are to stop being Theseus, we will need to better grasp the human centrality of the 'damaged life'.

³⁶⁰ Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, p. 244.

³⁶¹ Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 2:24. 'Reflections from Damaged Life' is, of course, the subtitle to *Minima Moralia*. Bernard Malamud's short story 'The German Refugee' is worth considering in this context (collected in Malamud, *Novels and Stories of the 1960s*, [Library of America, 2013]).

³⁶² Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno*, p. 244.

Bibliography

The following abbreviations have been used in the text to refer to those of Gadamer's books (and one of Heidegger's*) that have been central for my interpretation. Full references are in the bibliography below.

BT	<i>Being and Time*</i>
GC	<i>Gadamer on Celan</i>
HRE	<i>Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics</i>
IG	<i>The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy</i>
PDE	<i>Plato's Dialectical Ethics</i>
PH	<i>Philosophical Hermeneutics</i>
PT	<i>Praise of Theory</i>
RAS	<i>Reason in the Age of Science</i>
RB	<i>The Relevance of the Beautiful</i>
TM	<i>Truth and Method</i>

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